The New Criterion

April 1988

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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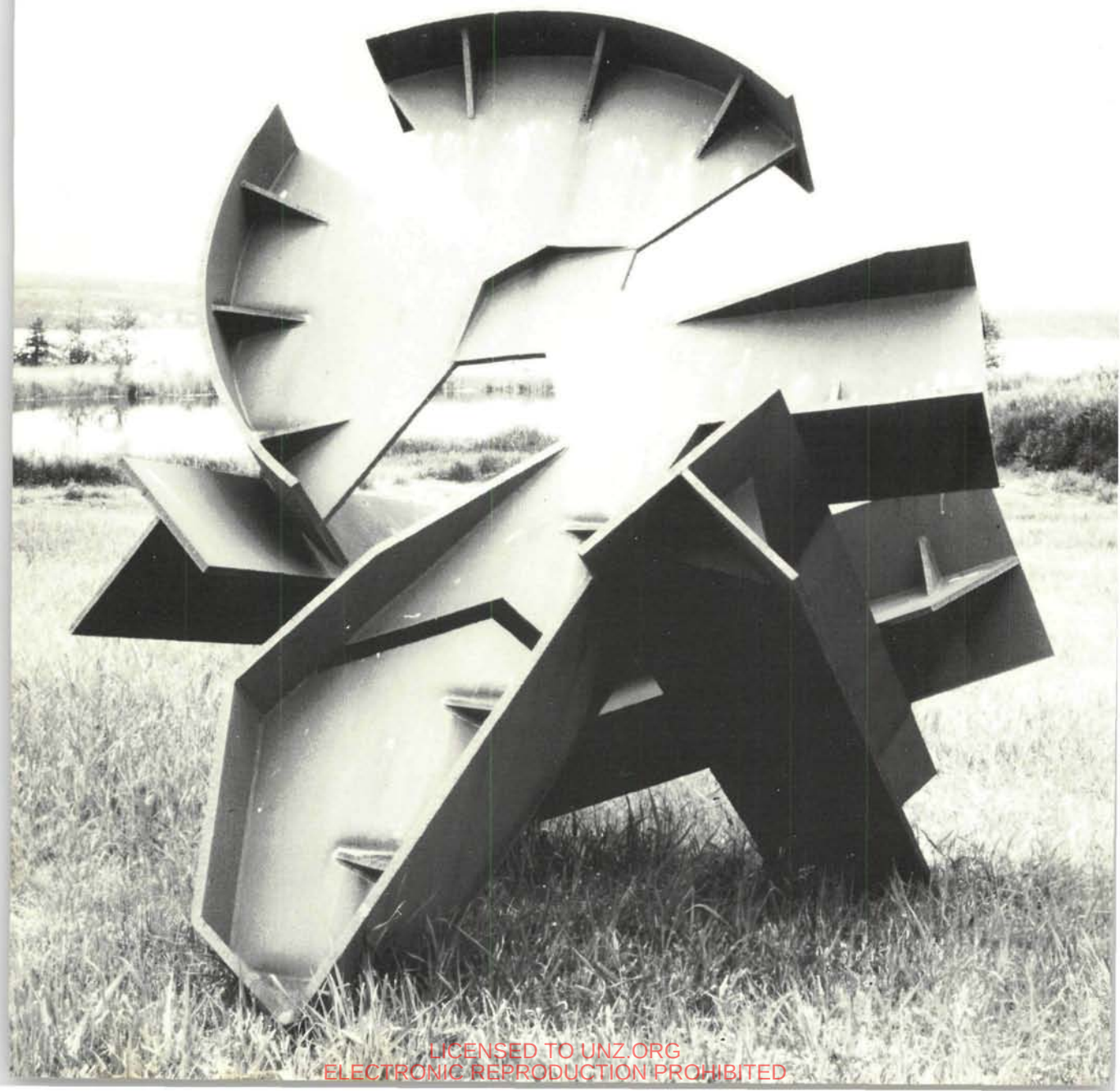

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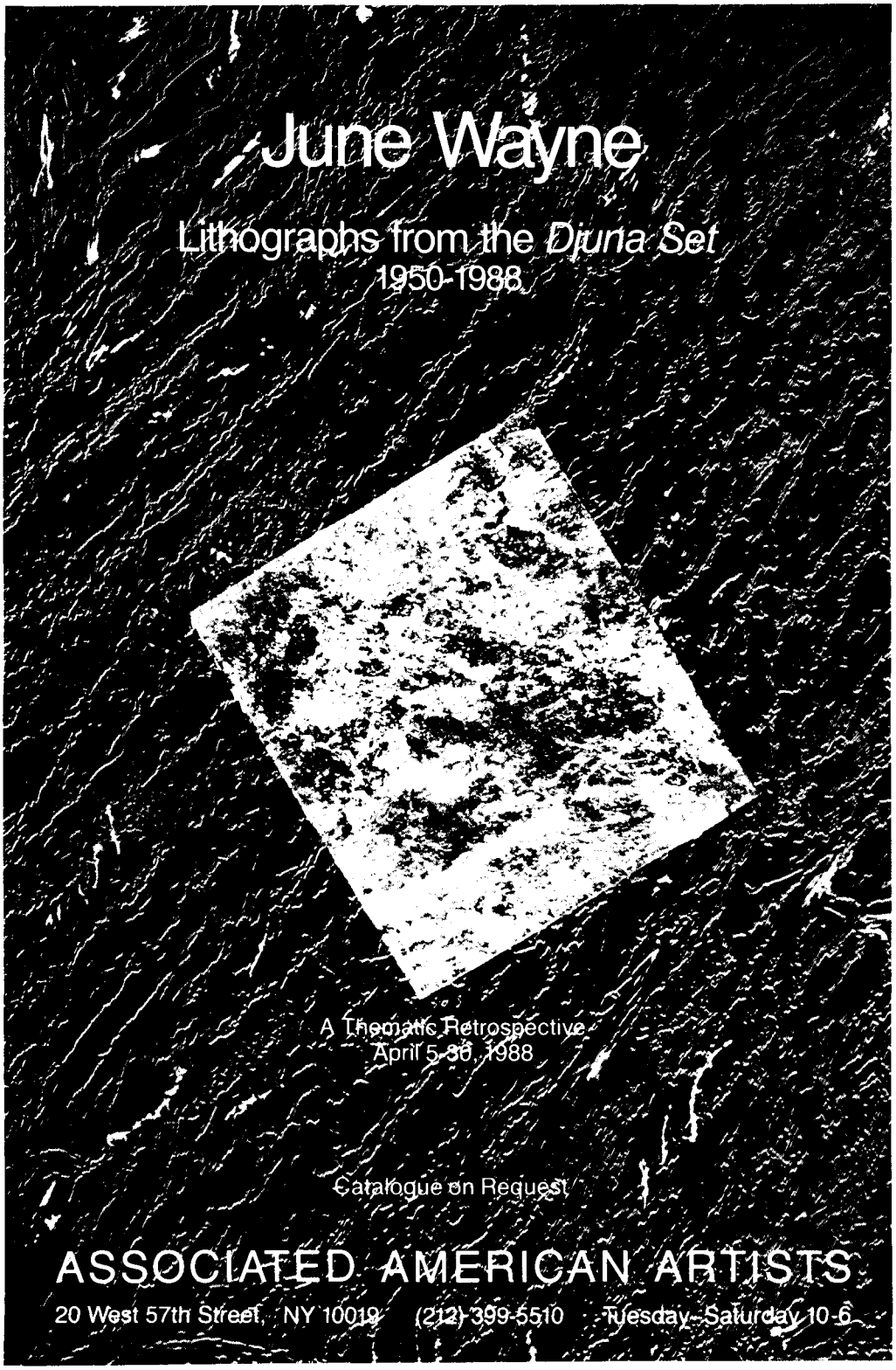

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Rembrandt as Warhol: Svetlana Alpers's "Enterprise"

by Hilton Kramer

From time to time we are given a new book that so vividly illuminates the intellectual ground we stand on that it instantly acquires the status of an emblematic event. As far as the study of art history is concerned—and more particularly, what has gone wrong with it—I believe we have now been given such a book in Professor Svetlana Alpers's *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market.*[1] Professor Alpers is one of the leading representatives of the kind of art history that now dominates the profession, and is widely recognized as an academic eminence of considerable power and influence. Occupying a senior position on the art history faculty at the University of California at Berkeley, she is the author of an earlier and much-praised study of seventeenth-century Dutch painting, *The Art of Describing* (1983), and serves as an editor of two academic journals, *Representations* and *The Raritan Review.* She is also, I believe, an advisor to the Getty operations that now play such a conspicuous role in the funding of art historical research. She has been a fellow of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and the recipient of numerous other fellowships and awards. *Rembrandt's Enterprise* is itself based on the Mary Flexner Lectures delivered at Bryn Mawr College in 1985—though, as we shall see, it was the more academic rather than the political parts of the book that were mainly vouchsafed to the audience at Bryn Mawr.

Clearly, we have in Professor Alpers one of the brightest stars now traversing the academic firmament. This makes it all the more imperative that we understand the nature of *her* enterprise, which I believe to be a wholly destructive one. To understand what she has set out to accomplish in this book, it is essential, however, that we have some sense of the intellectual situation of which *Rembrandt's Enterprise* is so important an expression. Only then will it be possible to see why her book is indeed an emblematic event—emblematic, that is, of the catastrophe that has overtaken not only the study of art history but much else that we prize in the life of the mind.

Is it an exaggeration to speak of a catastrophe in these matters? I think not. For it is one of the truly horrifying characteristics of the present age that so many of its most gifted scholars and intellectuals—especially in the fields of art history and literary study—are nowadays almost exclusively engaged in systematic and politically inspired demolition projects. In this respect they differ so greatly from even the most critical and contentious of their predecessors as to constitute a separate profession. To say that they no longer belong to the tradition of humanistic study is hardly sufficient to describe

1 *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market,* by Svetlana Alpers; University of Chicago Press, 160 pages, $29.95.

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what it is they are actually doing, for it is precisely this humanistic tradition and its accomplishments that all their intellectual energies are mobilized to "deconstruct"—which is to say, destroy. They may, perforce, still feel themselves obliged—as Professor Alpers does in her study of Rembrandt—to lavish attention upon the achievements which this tradition has elevated to a position of the highest esteem; but if so, it is only for the purpose of nullifying that esteem and placing those accomplishments in question.

It needs to be emphasized that there is much more involved in this phenomenon than a mere revision of received opinion. The greatest scholarship, like the greatest criticism, has always had a revisionist effect upon our thinking, for new research and new ideas in any field of study are bound sooner or later to dislodge established beliefs, topple entrenched intellectual authority, and introduce new interpretations and judgments. It is one of the purposes of new knowledge, after all, to alter our understanding, and it is all the more to be welcomed when it puts us more deeply in touch with the spirit as well as the substance of the objects of our study.

The academic projects I speak of, however, are different in purpose and in spirit from the scholarship and criticism of the past. It is the unmistakable goal of this new learning (as I suppose it must be called) not to bring us a deeper appreciation of the achievements of the past but, on the contrary, to discredit them in some fundamental way and thereby render the whole idea of achievement—in art or in anything else having to do with aesthetic or moral distinction—highly suspect if not indeed completely fraudulent.

Projects of this kind may take a variety of forms—or, as they say in the academy, may employ a variety of methodologies—but fundamental to all of them is the attempt to make the study of art a branch of the social sciences. By effecting this change of intellectual venue, these scholars hope (as they see it) to de-mystify their subject, strip it of its claims to any sort of aesthetic or spiritual achievement, and thus reduce it to a level where it is no longer to be differentiated from any other form of material culture. The very idea that a work of art may be thought to transcend the material conditions of its creation is an anathema to this new learning, which is rigidly deterministic in its entire outlook on art and life. The particular mode of determinism deemed most appropriate to the subject under study will vary, of course, according to the special ideological goals to which the study is tethered. The feminists and "gender" specialists will naturally favor a purely biological determinism; the Marxists (of whatever stripe) will similarly favor a purely economic or "class" determinism; and so on, as the emergence of sundry hybrid or cross-over ideologies prompts the creation of ever new methodological instruments. But the fundamental goal remains the same: art must be categorically removed from the realm of aesthetics and placed firmly in a realm where the only legitimate questions are those that can be asked about the material—which is to say, the political and economic—conditions of its production.

In the field of art history, this movement—in which Professor Alpers plays a major role—now commands the greatest academic prestige and the greatest academic patronage. Books by its leading practitioners and their many acolytes flow from the presses—especially the university presses—in ever greater numbers, and academic appointments are governed by its followers with a degree of control that old-time union leaders would have every reason to envy. The movement's hegemony—to borrow the atrocious term that is so often on the lips of its representatives—is becoming so nearly complete that newcomers to the field can no longer hope to have much of a career in art history if they are so rash as to register their dissent from its fundamental premises. Young art historians—and many who are no longer young—now face the choice of joining the herd or seeking employment elsewhere (meaning, of course, outside the academy). Under the circumstances, it is no exaggeration at all to speak of a catastrophe.

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It is one of Professor Alpers's distinctions as a writer to make this fateful turn in the outlook of art history—and indeed, in the whole notion of what art is—sound at times as if it were a weighty and even disinterested enterprise. Less obviously strident than many of her political colleagues and often more diligent in her research, she is remarkably adept at mimicking the tone of the old-style scholar when it serves her purpose, and thus at giving us the impression—at first glance, anyway—that there is nothing of the vulgar ideologue to be found in her arduous historical labors. The learned references accumulate with the requisite density, and there is even a show of civility (of a sort) toward one or another of her illustrious predecessors. Writing, for example, about Julius Held's assertion that Rembrandt's is "the work of a man who never compromised, who never permitted himself to be burdened with a chain of honor, and fiercely maintained both the integrity of his art and his freedom as a man," Professor Alpers observes (characteristically) that "this is not wrong, but the terms which are brought together here are unexamined." What she means is that they are not sufficiently political, and she then hastens to apply her own, more explicitly political terms to the question at issue here, which is Rembrandt's "individualism" and which is said in her account, not surprisingly, to be "a function of the economic system in which he lived."

Rembrandt's Enterprise is not a long book. The text consists of only 122 pages divided into four chapters, and there are thirty-two pages of notes. But it sometimes reads like a long book while one is trying—especially in the first three chapters—to figure out exactly where it is going and to what purpose. The observation I have quoted about Rembrandt's individualism, for instance, does not turn up until page 114, in Chapter IV, which is entitled "'Freedom, Art, and Money'"; and by that time, of course, we know where we stand—or rather, where Professor Alpers has been standing from the beginning. (The reference to Rembrandt as a man who "loved only three things: his freedom, art, and money," comes from J. B. Descamps's *La Vie des Peintres Flamandes, Allemands et Hollandois,* published in Paris in the eighteenth century.) But in the first three chapters of *Rembrandt's Enterprise,* though they are not without some interesting observations on the life of art in Rembrandt's time and on his own working methods, the gravamen of the argument is often elusive. As one makes one's way through the twists and turns of these first three chapters, one more and more has the sense of an indictment being drawn up, and while there is never any question in one's mind but that the culprit—namely Rembrandt—will be found guilty, the crime with which he is to be charged nonetheless remains obscure for pages at a time. It is only in Chapter IV that it is openly stated. Interestingly, it was this Chapter IV, which contains the substance of Professor Alpers's political charge, that was omitted from the Mary Flexner Lectures at Bryn Mawr. Which leads one to wonder what it was that the students in the audience at Bryn Mawr understood Professor Alpers to be talking about.

It must be said, too, that as a writer Professor Alpers has an extremely irritating habit of setting out to make a point, or at least of inducing the illusion that a point is about to be established by means of all the learned references that are set before us with such a showy display of erudition, and then, without the point ever really being made, of looking back on what she has been saying as if an irrefutable conclusion had been reached. This rhetorical strategy, if it can be called that, has the effect of rendering a good deal of the scholarship in the book either completely redundant or simply pedantic. Certainly much of it, though not without interest, proves to be irrelevant to her principal theme. But as we don't know for certain what the principal theme is until we get to that crucial fourth chapter, we are left to savor the erudition for its own sake—which is harmless, I suppose, even though it suggests that Professor Alpers is not primarily a thinker at all but a pedant who is dependent upon ideology for the substance of whatever

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thought she wishes to convey. It is, in any case, only when she comes to make an ideological point that her writing acquires an unmistakable clarity.

What, then, is the charge that Professor Alpers is so concerned to make in this book? What, in fact, is Rembrandt's "enterprise" claimed to have been?

The very word *Enterprise* in the book's title alerts us, of course, to the fact that we are to regard Rembrandt as first and foremost an entrepreneur, and the book's subtitle, *The Studio and the Market,* underscores the extent to which we are being invited on this occasion to consider Rembrandt's art primarily as a business. But there is more to Professor Alpers's charge than a mere description of the artist's role in marketing his pictures. She would certainly not want to be seen as one of those "vulgar" Marxists who see nothing in an artist's work but its economic function—although, in fact, when one has penetrated Professor Alpers's new-style academic jargon (Rembrandt's studio is described as "enabling," etc.) and waded through the 258 footnotes, it is quite apparent that her argument turns out to be far more dependent upon such crude Marxist formulations than she could ever bring herself to acknowledge.

It is in the very last paragraph of Chapter III that Professor Alpers gives us a first, brief, tantalizing glimpse of the case she means to bring against the artist she is writing about. (How frustrating it must have been for the Bryn Mawr audience to have the Mary Flexner Lectures conclude on a note that, in truth, marks their real beginning!) Writing in this chapter about *The Jewish Bride,* long considered one of Rembrandt's greatest works, she takes up the matter of the "universality" that has been traditionally attributed to so many of the artist's greatest works, and sets about the task of deconstructing the term. It isn't a true universality that can be claimed for *The Jewish Bride,* according to Professor Alpers, but only an "*effect* of universality" (her emphasis), and she then explains how this artificial "effect" is achieved:

> He makes a portrait more than a portrait by elevating the genre. [This, by the way, is not said in admiration.] But this *effect* of universality is achieved by masking or hiding the economic and social basis of the transaction between the painter and his sitters.

The suggestion of "individuality" in Rembrandt's subjects is likewise said to be something "imposed on them" by the "master's domination" of them. "One might say," she writes, "that rather than serving [his patrons], Rembrandt exercises his authority over them," and since we all know that for writers like Professor Alpers authority is always to be considered a very bad thing, this too figures in the indictment. Thus she concludes Chapter III with the following analysis:

> The nineteenth century credited Rembrandt with being uniquely in touch with something true about the individual human state. I would put it differently. It was something stranger and more unsettling. Rembrandt was not the discoverer, but one of the inventors of that individual state. And so his late works became a touchstone for what western culture, from his day until our own, has taken as the irreducible uniqueness of the individual.[2]

When we turn to Chapter IV of *Rembrandt's Enterprise,* we are bluntly informed that Rembrandt was "a man of the market," and this is intended to mean something more than the mere fact that he sold his paintings for money. And it is not meant to mean anything good, of course. The fact that Rembrandt achieved both a personal and artistic freedom by means of the market is taken by Professor Alpers to be crucial to the indictment she draws up against him.

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2 One notes with interest the lower-case "w" in this reference to "western" culture. Are we to take this as Professor Alpers's contribution to the current debate over the place to be accorded to courses in Western civilization in the liberal-arts curriculum? It would seem so.

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> He had a "propensity to truck, barter and exchange," in Adam Smith's famous phrase [writes Professor Alpers], and to make works suitable to such transactions. As a master in the studio he made himself a free individual, not beholden to patrons. But he was beholden instead to the market—or more specifically to the identification that he made between two representations of value, art and money.

In Professor Alpers's view, the market economy provided Rembrandt with his "models or definitions of self and art," and the market itself is said to have marked "the establishment of a system of representation." (It is at this point in the argument that Professor Alpers effects a marriage of sorts between the crude Marxist formulations that lie at the heart of her analysis and the familiar twaddle of post-structuralist academic jargon.) Since it was from the market that Rembrandt is alleged to have derived his "models or definitions of self and art" and the market was itself "a system of representation," it is no longer a mystery as to where Professor Alpers's argument is going. "Rembrandt was also a maker of representations," she writes, "hence the appropriateness of his making art into a commodity to be exchanged in a marketplace so perceived." And then, just in case we are in danger of missing the point, she writes: "One can say of this artist what Adam Smith said of mankind, 'Every man thus lives by exchanging or becomes in some measure a merchant.'" The next paragraph begins: "Let us consider Rembrandt's paintings as commodities . . . ."

But what was it that Rembrandt was actually selling in the market—besides his paintings, that is? He was selling what Professor Alpers is fond of calling "the individuality 'effect,'" and this is said to be "a function of the economic system in which [Rembrandt] lived and in which he played such an active part." There then follows this remarkable passage:

> It was in Rembrandt's time that the individual came to be defined in what were then new, economic terms. Those familiar words from the American declaration of human rights, "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," are a reworking of Locke's "life, liberty and estate" which constituted his definition of property: "By Property I must be understood . . . to mean that Property which Men have in their Persons as well as Goods." On this view, to be an individual is defined by the right to property. And the most essential property right of each man, and hence the grounding of this notion of the individual, curious though it might sound put in this form, is the right to property in one's own person. Freedom, then, is defined as proprietorship in and of one's own person and capacities. It is the proprietorial quality of this notion of the individual to which I wish to call attention. It was Rembrandt who made this the center of his art—the center, even, of Art.

In reading this passage, it is important to understand—it does, admittedly, take some effort—that Professor Alpers is not lavishing any praise on either Rembrandt or liberty or the concept of the individual. Far from it. She is concerned to unmask the true nature of Rembrandt's enterprise. And what was that? Well, he stands charged with having commodified *himself* by virtue of having painted and marketed his own self-portraits. On page 118 we are finally given Professor Alpers's definitive judgment on the great self-portraits: "Rembrandt was an entrepreneur of the self."

All through the reading and re-reading of this last, ghastly chapter of *Rembrandt's Enterprise,* I was overcome with a sense of having read it, or something very like it, before. It is a feeling one often has in reading the "new" art historians, and the new literary scholars, too. No matter what their subject, and no matter how "original" their treatment of it, there is a political scenario that tends to repeat itself over and over again, endlessly striking the same notes, and leading to the same conclusions. In the case of *Rembrandt's Enterprise,* however, it wasn't of another art historian that (I came to realize) I was being reminded. It was of that

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eminent Marxist literary theorist and academic, Professor Fredric Jameson. At the risk of depressing the readers of this article even more than I already have, I want to quote the relevant passage from Professor Jameson's essay on "Postmodernism and Consumer Society"—which, as a matter of fact, I have quoted once before in these pages[3] but which I must return to once again because it explains so much about the nature of Professor Alpers's enterprise.

> The great modernisms [Professor Jameson wrote] were . . . predicated on the invention of a personal, private style, as unmistakable as your fingerprint, as incomparable as your own body. But this means that the modernist aesthetic is in some way organically linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style.
>
> Yet today [we] . . . are all exploring the notion that that kind of individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past; that the old individual or individualist subject is "dead"; and that one might even describe the concept of the unique individual and the theoretical basis of individualism as ideological. There are in fact two positions on all this, one of which is more radical than the other. The first one is content to say: yes, once upon a time, in the classic age of competitive capitalism, in the heyday of the nuclear family and the emergence of the bourgeoisie as the hegemonic social class, there was such a thing as individualism, as individual subjects. But today, in the age of corporate capitalism, of the so-called organization man, of bureaucracies in business as well as in the state, of demographic explosion—today, that older bourgeois individual subject no longer exists.
>
> Then there is a second position, the more radical of the two, what one might call the poststructuralist position. It adds: not only is the bourgeois individual subject a thing of the past, it is also a myth; it *never* really existed in the first place; there have never been autonomous subjects of that type. Rather, this construct is merely a philosophical and cultural mystification which sought to persuade people that they "had" individual subjects and possessed this unique personal identity.

Professor Alpers does not tell us which of these "positions" she is espousing in *Rembrandt's Enterprise.* I suspect it is the first—but then it hardly matters. The point is, it is this political interpretation of the concept of the individual and of Rembrandt's role in fostering it that *Rembrandt's Enterprise* is really about. This, anyway, is its manifest subject. But I think the book is also to be taken as a political allegory about the relation of art to life in our time as well. Indeed, the more one thinks about *Rembrandt's Enterprise,* the more Professor Alpers's "Rembrandt" comes to resemble an artist like Andy Warhol, the most successful "entrepreneur of the self" in the art of our own era. Rembrandt as Warhol: such is the fate of even the greatest art when it is so categorically removed from the realm of aesthetics and made to do duty as just another counter in the dialectic of material culture. Such, too, is the dismal fate of art history when the study of art is no longer its primary concern.

3 See "Modernism and Its Enemies" in *The New Criterion* for March 1986.

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André Gide: Faust or Mephistopheles?

by Renee Winegarten

Faustus: *How comes it then that thou art out of hell?*
Mephistophilis *(in the likeness of a friar): Why this is hell, nor am I out of it . . . .*
—Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus,* Act I, scene iii

"The unconcealed and palpable influence of the devil on an important part of contemporary literature is one of the significant phenomena of the history of our time." This strange note was written in the early Twenties at the height of the controversy over André Gide's mounting influence (which would extend from François Mauriac, Jean Cocteau, and Henry de Montherlant to Jean-Paul Sartre and lesser lights). Its author was the neo-Thomist intellectual Jacques Maritain, who had the creator of *Les Nourritures terrestres* in his sights. The Catholic philosopher went to call on the Protestant-educated Gide to urge him to withhold publication of *Corydon,* a work that justified "Greek love," or pederasty (hitherto the book had been printed anonymously and privately only in a very small number of copies). Maritain's intervention failed to make Gide change his mind: indeed, it probably confirmed his resolve to go ahead.

Once a subject of scandal, Gide's writings and influence now scarcely cause a murmur. His oeuvre has entered the literary canon. His letters have been published; the details of his daily life have become known. It is now possible to write a perfectly anodyne biography of the great modern fisher in troubled waters.[1] A revolution in manners separates us from those whose moral sensibility was such that they thought Gide to be *the* supremely dangerous modern author. And this *frisson* was occasioned by his entire outlook, once the reader could penetrate the veils of skillful distancing, shifting perspectives, and subtle private ironies.

After his own unsuccessful, hammer-like attempts to convert the Protestant Gide to Catholicism, Paul Claudel, diplomat as well as poet and dramatist, called him "a poisoner." The Maurrasian critic Henri Massis saw Gide as nothing less than "demonic." Rather more discriminating was the Catholic novelist François Mauriac (who, like Claudel, worked in the steamy realm of sensuality and religion). He acknowledged his own debt to Gide and enjoyed a long if guarded literary associaton with his elder colleague. Nonetheless, after Gide's death in 1951, Mauriac wrote: "Inimitable Gide! With what trickery he always knew how to rid himself of his heavily armed opponents!" Mauriac marveled at Gide's agility, how "wearing the doublet and under the cloak of Mephistopheles (or rather was he not Faust in the devil's cast-off clothing?) he climbed over their bodies and hastened to his pleasures or his books." It is doubtful whether Gide would have been much gratified by this barbed obituary. (Still, it was better than the

1 *André Gide,* by Jean-Jacques Thierry, was recently published by Hachette; 210 pages, 89 F.

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notorious "A corpse has died," the unforgiving Communist summing-up of a fellow-traveller who had ventured to print his second thoughts about the Soviet regime.)

Clearly, a number of distinguished Catholic writers sensed that in Gide they had a formidable adversary. Somehow, this elite soul (as they first thought of him) had slipped through their fingers. He was not, after all, as he had sometimes appeared to them, a questing spirit, but had spoken to them in disguise, as it were, like Mephistopheles in the shape of a friar. They detested not only the justifier of pederasty who openly proclaimed his hatred of church, marriage, and family, but also the tempter, the artist with his limpid and musical prose who was using moral and spiritual terminology and skillfully turning it to his own ends. It was with his literary and personal charm that he could tempt vulnerable souls to follow the course he suggested: the rejection of all constraint, the pursuit of self-realization and self-fulfillment, often regardless of the sacrifice (of others) along the way.

In Gide, then, there can be found the justification of Faustian self-creation, boundless intellectual curiosity, and reckless hedonism which have come to predominate in Western culture and societies to such a degree that they apparently no longer need to be justified. Gide, who became acquainted with Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* and who knew Goethe's *Faust* extremely well, followed the latter in its departure from the moral premises of the original legend. If he naturally did not endorse redemption through the *Ewig-Weibliche* (the "Eternal Feminine"), he did subscribe to the Goethean notion of enrichment and growth through the acceptance and exploration of all human possibilities. How did Gide himself come to join the line of the Faustian overreacher?

When in 1923 Jacques Maritain called on Gide to suppress *Corydon,* that dazzling advocate of experiencing every sensation to the full was already well into his fifties. Born in 1869, Gide published his first work, *Les Cahiers d'André Walter,* in 1891. That very year also saw the publication of J.-K. Huysmans's *Là-Bas,* with its *fin de siècle* Satanism. In 1891, Gide's schoolfriend Pierre Louÿs (later known as a writer of erotica) assured the young poet Paul Valéry that he (Valéry) was "Satanique" because he admired Huysmans. Gide hastened to accept the claim, too: ". . . certainly we are Sataniques," he wrote to his friend Valéry, whose gifts, he felt, overshadowed his own. As Pierre Louÿs told Gide at that time, he himself preferred Michelet's *La Sorcière* (1862) to Huysmans's work. According to the eccentric belief of that influential historian of revolution, Satan personified all revolutionary truths which are at first thought to be harmful but which are finally recognized as fruitful. The notion of Satan as the grand revaluer of values may be found in Gide's later work, and this aspect was confirmed when he discovered Blake and added him to his pantheon of Goethe, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky.

Certainly, young Gide formed part of the line that issued from Baudelaire, with his Satanic litanies and flowers of evil. He derived, too, from the ambience of the *fin de siècle* Decadent movement, with its literary Satanism, its ostentatious sadomasochism, its fascination with sin. Despite its patent absurdity, this movement had a serious, subversive aspect. Later, Gide specifically rejected any Romantic or Byronic image of the devil, but he was nonetheless marked by his literary forebears. In the "Black Notebook" of *Les Cahiers d'André Walter,* for instance, chastity is seen as vanity or pride in disguise. Satan appears there as the master of metamorphosis, and is associated with "ever more knowing varieties of sensuality." The fictional author of the "Black Notebook," André Walter, is carried off by brain fever, that once convenient disease for removing characters who are getting out of hand. The devil of Gide's youth is thus the tempter through the flesh and sensuality—one aspect of Faust's insatiable desires. Allain, the protagonist of the novel that André Walter is writing, goes mad. In this early work, the theme of "refined perver-

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sion" is thus held twice removed through Allain and André Walter from the actual author of the book. The tension lies between the drive toward indulgence in sensuality and the apparent moral-cum-spiritual rejection of it through madness and death.

Gide made his debut in the salons of poets like Stéphane Mallarmé and José-María de Heredia. It was in these aesthetic circles that he could see painters like Whistler. In 1891, Gide met Oscar Wilde for the first time. Oscar was then approaching the height of his fame, dazzling *le Tout-Paris* with his Irish wit and charm, influenced by French literature and influencing it. Young Gide fell completely under his spell. He saw the great aesthete again by chance in Florence, but a major encounter took place in Algeria in 1895. It was to Wilde, then on the brink of disaster, that Gide ascribed his full initiation into pederasty. This account may be somewhat overdramatic, for Gide had already experienced an "adventure" at Sousse in Tunisia. Since then, as he later expressed it, "the Evil One doubtless had no great victory to gain over me . . . ." Gide sometimes liked to suggest that Oscar had done him a good deal of harm. He was, however, fully conscious of Wilde's "greatness" (so egregiously expounded by Richard Ellmann in the laudatory posthumously published biography of the creator of Dorian Gray). Following his master's example, Gide too attempted to subvert accepted *mores.*

The Wildean dream of tasting all the fruits of the earth, along with the notion of ridding oneself of a temptation by yielding to it, is echoed by Ménalque, the Virgilian guide and mentor in Gide's poetic narrative, *Les Nourritures terrestres* (1897), who is also partly the author himself. Here, the disciple, Nathanaël, is enjoined to be receptive to everything: "TO TAKE UPON ONESELF THE GREATEST DEGREE OF HUMANITY POSSIBLE, that is just what is required." Then Nathanaël is repeatedly advised to cast away the elder's book, and to follow his own particular urges in his quest for authenticity, thus creating "the most irreplaceable of beings." In Gide's diary, sin would become "sin" in inverted commas. Temptations are no longer called temptations, as Gide moves toward what he calls "the superior immorality." This was the much vaunted new ethic of the new man on the brink of a new age (an ethic whose fulfillment he would momentarily discover in the Stalinist regime). Though now often insufferable because of its ecstatic exclamations, its didactic tone on the theme of "seize the day," and its heady perfumed lyricism, *Les Nourritures terrestres,* essentially a guide for "artists," became the gospel of the interwar years, presumably because it encouraged people to act as they desired and gave them apparently high-sounding reasons for doing so.

Heir of Baudelaire, of Mallarmé, of Wilde, André Gide began writing at a period when art was Art with a capital "A," and practiced for its own sake. (He would always be inclined to live in bohemian "arty" squalor if left to his own devices. His later habit of going around "decked out like a student in 1890," wearing a large-brimmed hat, a cloak, a floppy silk bow, and calling himself André Walter, would enrage his secretive fellow pederast, Henry de Montherlant, who regretted having lent Gide his apartment in Algiers in 1929.) "The thing I value most is my art," Gide could declare during a public discussion on his political commitment in the Thirties.

Deceptively, in the preface to his novel *L'Immoraliste* (1902), he wrote blandly that he had not sought to prove anything, but to portray the subject to the best advantage. If only matters were so clear and straightforward in Gide's art! He might say gaily to an interviewer that morality was dependent on aesthetics, or confide to his diary that the aesthetic viewpoint was the only one to adopt when his works were to be judged, but he mystified the reader by his sleight-of-hand where morality was concerned. For notwithstanding his new ethic—which in essence demonstrates by paradox how the promptings of the evil inclination are really good—he went on talking about purity, the soul, salvation, and his belief in Christ (as distinct from received religion and the con-

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ventionally pious). In one sense, this was the much-touted and convenient acceptance of contradictions, the disinclination to choose because that meant rejecting what was not chosen. (That this restlessness was visceral may be gleaned from the pained account of Gide's lucid friend and literary counselor, the novelist Roger Martin du Gard, who tells how Gide could obsessively scour a train from one end to the other before settling at last into a seat.) In another sense, such contradictoriness was a way of adopting different masks, not dissimilar to that of Wilde.

Take Michel, the Nietzschean protagonist of *L'Immoraliste* who pursues his own sensual obsessions at the expense of his wife's very existence. It seems to his friends, to whom he tells his appalling tale, that "by relating it Michel had made his deed more legitimate." He has turned them almost into "accomplices." And Gide has made the same thing happen to his readers also. Whatever the expressions of disapproval voiced at the beginning and near the end of the book, it closes on the note of Michel's interest in the child Ali—the name, it may be pointed out, of the boy who "offered himself" to Gide in the sand dunes of Sousse. It looks, then, as if the moral judgment of what Michel calls his "crime," and the ambivalent distaste felt by his friends-and-hearers, are superimposed relics of an attitude that Gide himself has really jettisoned in life but has retained in art in order to placate both his wife, with her traditionalist views, and those readers who would be unlikely to appreciate his intention to liberate humankind from its mind-forged manacles.

Years later, outraged by accusations of perverting youth, Gide could insist to Roger Martin du Gard: ". . . my influence has always been useful and healthy. Indeed, it is not a paradox: my role has always been that of a *moralizer*" (his italics). Significantly, he used the word "moralisateur" as distinct from the term "moraliste," or student of human behavior (a term which does not imply any value judgment concerning good and evil). Yet in actuality he continued the line of the French *moralistes* by observing in his diary that he thought it unprofitable to judge human actions in categories of good and evil. On the contrary, he would go further, maintaining that a comfortable kind of good, as cherished by the bourgeoisie, leads to stagnation, whereas evil as a manifestation of energy is of greater educational and initiatory worth than what is commonly known as good. This, he insisted, was what he had come to believe ever more devoutly.

The inability to stop moralizing despite (or because of) questionable conduct may well be attributed to the fact that Gide was the scion of a strict Protestant family. Protestants, once persecuted, remained a minority apart in France. Gide was an only child, brought up by his dominating, sternly virtuous mother. Familiar with the Bible, he could always quote Scripture with ease and interpret it with Mephistophelean skill to serve his own turn. He was indoctrinated with the ideal of purity, and the duty to flee the sins of the flesh. But he also possessed in high degree that spirit of free inquiry which had inspired the Protestant revolt in the first place; and this, eventually, led him to loathe what he had been taught to call virtue in his youth. He came to regard it as constricting, life-denying, joyless, unhealthy—and all the more so as it ran counter to his deepest instincts and inclinations.

Gide first travelled to North Africa in 1893 with the painter Paul-Albert Laurens. There, he not only met the boy Ali and his companions but he also shared with Laurens the favors of Mériem, a girl of the Ouled Naïl tribe or courtesan. (It is difficult nowadays to avoid making all this sound rather like some best-seller of yesteryear in the style of *The Garden of Allah.*) Then Gide became so attached to a fourteen-year-old named Athman that he wanted to bring the dark-skinned youth back with him to Paris in 1895. A fierce battle by correspondence ensued with Gide's outraged mother. Not long afterwards, however, Mme. Gide died. A few months later, Gide married his

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cousin, Madeleine, after consulting a doctor who unwisely advised him to go ahead.

The destiny of Madeleine, whom Gide always claimed to love since childhood with a unique noble devotion—and probably did idealize after his egocentric fashion—remains poignant. Timid, conventional, devout, Madeleine had suffered deeply on learning of her own mother's adultery. Gide has left directly in his diaries (and obliquely through his fiction) varied accounts of his disreputable behavior: not least how he neglected his young wife, especially after he found that she had no taste for the kind of emancipation to which he aspired. Indeed, he once wrote that Madeleine merged with his mother in his dreams, where both played an inhibiting role.

Whatever Madeleine guessed, or did not want to know, she could no longer conceal from herself after she opened in error a letter from her husband's one-time boon companion, Henri Ghéon. It was the reformed Ghéon who would confess to Léon-Pierre Quint: "For twenty years I accompanied him [Gide] on his travels [to Algeria, Italy, Spain, Greece, Turkey] . . . . In Paris we always used to go out together . . . . Until four or six o'clock in the morning we would wander around Les Halles, in shady little cafés, among pimps and prostitutes, with boys whose youth endowed them with beauty, drug dealers sometimes or habitual criminals . . . . Danger aroused us." In theory, this secret life of Gide's was not supposed to interfere with his spiritual bond with his wife. But then Gide fell seriously in love with a handsome adolescent, Marc Allégret, and accompanied him to Cambridge in June, 1918, a few months before the end of the war.

On Gide's return, Madeleine told him that she had destroyed all his letters to her. He was so shattered that he wept for days (tears always came easily to him): "It's the best of me that has disappeared and will no longer counterbalance the worst . . . . I am suffering as if she had killed our child," he wrote in the intimate diary, *Et Nunc Manet in Te*. In a sense, it was the alibi of his eternal lofty spiritual love for her that she had destroyed in her bitterness at his departure with Marc Allégret.

Worse was to come for Madeleine. During his work for refugees at the Foyer Franco-Belge in the First World War, Gide had met "la petite dame," the wife of the Belgian painter Théo Van Rysselberghe. The couple became his close associates. In 1923, their daughter gave birth to Gide's child, Catherine. Possibly informed by a "friend," Madeleine distributed to others all her husband's gifts and withdrew into obsessive housewifery and good works at Cuverville, their Normandy home, until her solitary death in 1938. At that time, Roger Martin du Gard was surprised to discern in Gide no signs of guilt or remorse. There was indeed something "Satanique" in his persistent challenge to his wife's virtues.

Gide claimed to have "discovered" the devil as an active force, and even as an explanation for his earlier conduct, in 1914. It was at Cuverville, during a discussion with Jacques Raverat (painter friend of the "neo-pagan" poet, Rupert Brooke). This "discovery" seems somewhat unlikely: Gide would not only have found the Tempter in the Gospels, but (as we have seen) he alluded to him in his early works. Indeed, he had shown the eponymous protagonist of his play *Saül* to be in love with David and possessed by demons. ("What exactly are your devil or devils?" inquired the skeptical poet Valéry in a letter to Gide in 1898.) Rather more probable is that he had "discovered" a way to make use of the devil to express his own inner conflicts in his writings. "I am consciously employing here, as before, a vocabulary and images that imply a mythology in which it is not absolutely essential for me to believe," he wrote in his diary in 1916.

Contributing to this deepening awareness of the devil as a positive and active principle were several factors (apart from the discussion with Raverat and their joint reading of Milton), including his fascination with the criminal mind and his work on his impor-

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tant study of Dostoevsky. Gide had been reading Dostoevsky at least since 1896, and the shadow of the mighty Russian novelist, who always retained the power to astonish him, falls upon the satire *Les Caves du Vatican* (1914) and to a greater degree on that tantalizing novel *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (1926).

Gide perceived that for Dostoevsky the intellect plays a demonic role. He freely admitted that he was using Dostoevsky as a pretext for expressing his own ideas. Thus he turned the deeply Slav Orthodox Christian, who knew all the twists and turns of doubt, upon his head. Repeating "What is man's potential?" (the query of Valéry's Monsieur Teste), which Gide calls the atheist's question, he maintains that Dostoevsky understood it perfectly, for the Russian saw that the negation of God leads to the affirmation of man. But whereas in Dostoevsky this affirmation is portrayed as negative and destructive, in Gide it is the very point of his argument. Many years later (in 1947) Gide was to elaborate upon this affirmation in his diary, declaring that "some at least" have to find virtue in themselves instead of in God. He would envisage God as being supplanted by man's virtue and dignity: "*Et eritis sicut dei.* (It is in this sense that I want to understand that old saying of the Tempter—who, like God, lives only in our mind—and to see in this proposal, claimed to be fallacious, a possibility of salvation.)" How, in 1947, could he have envisaged salvation through man—that weak reed? In quoting the words of the serpent in Genesis—"and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil"—Gide notably omitted the second part. The Gidean savior has to pass beyond good and evil.

It was in his study of Dostoevsky that Gide proffered a now celebrated proverb of his own (after the fashion of those of Blake in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*): "There is no work of art without the collaboration of the devil." These words were inspired by Blake's startling comment on Milton to the effect that the creator of *Paradise Lost* "was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it." Gide's influential proverb aroused the ire of Jacques Maritain, who called it a Manichaean blasphemy as well as an absurdity, for, he declared, "evil is not creative." Gide would hold firmly and dangerously to the opposite view.

In Gide's diary, the encounter with the devil takes the form of a dramatic conversation and confrontation between the individual soul and the *raisonneur,* at once the immensely powerful and witty debater and (in the nineteenth-century French theatrical sense) the one who expresses the dramatist's viewpoint. The Gidean devil takes possession of the soul by reasoning, and by demonstrating logically what the soul most wants to hear: namely, whatever is felt to be necessary is permitted. The devil is "far more intelligent than we are"; he lies hidden in Cartesian reasoning—"*cogito ergo Satanas* [I think therefore Satan is]." As Gide's devil proclaims: "I am your inclination." A further development of Gide's discussion with the devil occurs in the appendix to the *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs,* the writer's diary of the novel's composition. There, the devil insinuates himself into the human heart through our very unbelief in him. It is not necessary to believe in the devil to serve him, wrote Gide: "the less I believe in him, the more I reinforce him . . . ." And he makes the devil say: "Why should you be afraid of me? You know I do not exist." Here is an excruciating form of casuistry.

It is not always absolutely clear whether the human participant in the discussion of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* is the author, his alter ego the novelist Édouard, or another invented character. Perhaps ultimately such a distinction is immaterial. The strength of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* comes from this very dubiety. The originality of the book lies in the fact that one is not always sure whether one is reading Édouard's novel and notebook or Gide's—a method of distancing he essayed long before in *Les Cahiers d'André Walter,* and one that has since been imitated *ad nauseam* to underline the nature of fiction and to disturb the reader.

The continuing need to see evil in his undertakings (while undermining the con-

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cept of evil), to rationalize it, and to proceed regardless—all this is essential to Gide's game at the time (the Twenties). For in yielding to the idea that what he feels to be supremely necessary to him is indeed permissible, he recognizes that Satan is an active and energetic life-force. As Gide was to say some years later, in the public debate on political commitment: "in man there are forces regarded as evil which nonetheless can become in their turn elements of strength and progress." Yet clearly the pursuit of total receptivity and instinct is not being suggested as a course open to any but elite spirits in their ascent to what he called "superior immorality." He was not to know —though he might surely have guessed— that through vulgarization, as in Norman Mailer's notorious essay "The White Negro," the cult of energy and self-realization would descend to the street thug.

In *Les Caves du Vatican* it is an elegant bastard, Lafcadio, who is tempted to commit "a gratuitous act" of murder by throwing out of the railway carriage an old man he does not even know. Much ink has been spilt over the gratuitous or motiveless deed, although Gide did not strictly believe that any action could be completely without motive. He needed satanic debate even more for *Les Faux-Monnayeurs,* where the devil circulates incognito. Not only do schoolboys engaged in passing counterfeit coin lead lonely young Boris to kill himself, in class, in front of his grandfather, La Pérouse. The novel is peopled also by hypocritical elders, corrupters like the fashionable writer Passavant (a sharp caricature of Cocteau, who had supposedly tried to attract Marc Allégret), and other untrustworthy figures. Notable among the corrupted is Vincent: the stages of that young man's reasoning, whereby the devil gradually takes possession of him, are enumerated, including—ironically enough—the "new ethic" which he thinks he should invent in order to justify his conduct. Without realizing it, Vincent has himself become one who corrupts, and he ends by murdering his mistress and believing he is the devil incarnate. The real climax of the work, however, is the attack by aged La Pérouse upon a cruel God who is at one with the devil.

On the subject of Satan, Gide told his adoring translator, Dorothy Bussy (Lytton Strachey's sister), whom he first met in Cambridge in 1918 when he was reading Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*: "I sometimes pretend to believe in him, but . . . finally I don't at all believe in him . . . ." Satan serves in Gide's work as a literary device. Dorothy Bussy saw through the game, and she charged him with "cheating with the devil." The game was really at its most intense at the time of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs.* Afterwards, Gide did not publish any fiction of equal merit.

"How is it," inquired François Mauriac, "that Gide does not see—beyond any moral question and solely considering the demands of art—that an erotic literature will be the result of his doctrine?" Mauriac had in mind the dreary eroticism of young writers in the Twenties. Over two decades later, in 1948 (after Gide had received the Nobel Prize for literature), Roger Martin du Gard commented that "the powerful influence, the historical importance of Gide can be measured by the *passivity* of the defenders of received morality when confronted by the boldness of his ideas and the persistence he has employed, with impunity, in propounding them . . . . It is an unforeseen passivity, which seems to betray a lack of confidence in traditional condemnation." He overlooked the Catholic party but, for the rest, his comment on general passivity seems just. What would Roger Martin du Gard say, were he alive now, and unable to elude the distasteful exhibitionist candor that mars so many otherwise ambitious and intelligent contemporary works of imagination? This trend toward ever greater Gidean-style "sincerity" often passes without a word of disapproval from literary critics, either because they are in the swim or afraid of being thought out of it.

Apparently, Gide never imagined that his "new ethic" would lead from liberty to

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license. That ethic was intended for himself and the happy few; and he doubtless expected to mystify the rest of us with his mockery and self-mockery, his brilliant sleight-of-hand regarding evil and the devil in whom he pretended to believe. The image of Goethean serenity that he carefully cultivated in old age was surely just another deceptive mask. Yet Gide, in his dual role of Faust and Mephistopheles, was one of the major creators and masters of the contemporary mode. This very mode has long since passed beyond him. Consequently, his luster has inevitably become dimmed—rather like that of Valéry's obsolete Méphistophélès in *Mon Faust,* recently so amazingly embodied by Robert Hirsch on the Paris stage. Nowadays, intellectuals can openly question the value of the term "evil," even if they cannot quite bring themselves to deny that something like its poisonous flora is still very much with us. It is surely time at last to see through the once daring paradoxes and reversals of writers like Wilde and his disciple Gide, and to challenge the subversive "new ethic" which has reigned so long and which they formulated in order to serve their own private interests.

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"Talking 'Terrorism'" at Stanford

by David Gress

How, at the end of the 1980s, would we expect a great American university to celebrate the centenary of its founding? More specifically, how would we expect such a university to honor its humanities faculty in a celebration of this sort? Is it conceivable that the university would welcome, as one of several honored lecturers, the legal counsel for the notorious Baader-Meinhof gang, and listen to a philosophical defense of its murderous activities? Is it conceivable that it would invite, as the keynote speaker, a PLO apologist like Edward Said to lecture on the perfidy of the United States and Israel? Or that it would call upon a radical journalist like Christopher Hitchens to discuss American "propaganda" and the "terrorism" of the contras in Nicaragua? Is this what the study of the humanities has come to signify at Stanford?

As odd as it may seem, this is precisely how the humanities were represented when the university played host in February to "Talking 'Terrorism': Ideologies and Paradigms in a Postmodern World," one of a series of conferences the university has scheduled to mark its centenary in 1991. But then, this has not been a very good year for the humanities faculty at Stanford. It is currently embroiled in a furious debate over whether to change its undergraduate "core" reading list to include more non-Western, non-white, and non-male writers. The current list was introduced in 1980, twelve years after the faculty abolished a more coherent Western civilization requirement during the heyday of student unrest in the Sixties. This mini-history of abolition, timid restoration, and renewed attack perfectly encapsulates the ebb and flow of ideological battle in American higher education. What "Talking 'Terrorism'" revealed, among much else, was the extent to which that battle has already been lost, and what this defeat will mean to the future of the American university.

"Talking 'Terrorism'" was held from February 4 to 6 at Stanford's School of Education. But before entering the main auditorium, one was required to pass through a lobby filled with displays. Two banks of television screens showed repeating sequences of films, including interviews with terrorism experts. The tendency of these interviews was clear from the fact that the experts spent much of their time urging viewers to read certain books, particularly Noam Chomsky's analyses of world affairs, such as *The Real Terror Network*. Between the banks of screens another large screen showed stills of rioting Palestinians, marching Sandinistas, Chinese Red Guards, and other enemies of "Western imperialism." An occasional flash of Winston Churchill holding a gun helped to hammer home another message: that the real terrorists, as Chomsky argues, are the United States and other Western governments, and that what we normally call terrorism is in fact a justified response to

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merciless and brutal repression—repression for which we, as citizens of the West, are supposedly responsible. The Churchill shot (dating from the British general strike of 1926 when, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, he advocated the use of force against illegal pickets) added the extra point that Western state terror is long-standing; indeed, that modern Western democratic capitalism is intrinsically terroristic and attempts to destroy it are not merely understandable but worthy of support. There were also videotapes on offer in the lobby, providing what the organizers presumably considered a reasonable selection of information about the subject of terrorism. Of the five tapes listed in the brochure I saw, three were by the well-known anti-Israeli journalist Monica Maurer and contained the single message that Israeli occupation policy is uniquely violent and terroristic. Maurer, in fact, has made her own the Palestinian accusation that the Jews of Israel are doing to them what the Nazis did to the Jews. Another tape defended the Peruvian Shining Path, possibly the most brutal and ruthless political group in the world since the Khmer Rouge perpetrated their atrocities in Cambodia in the 1970s.

In this welter of exculpation one did miss one aspect: there were no tapes justifying terror by right-wing groups; no pleas for an understanding of the Italian neo-fascists who are supposed to have placed the bomb that killed eighty-four people in the Bologna train station in 1976, or of Argentinian or Salvadoran death squads. Can it be that these types of terrorists, whose subjective sense of wrong is presumably as great as that of their progressive fellows, do not have the sympathetic ear of the media? Here, surely, is a rich vein to mine for a future conference on "talking 'terrorism.'"

Given that the lobby displays were so overtly about political violence itself—and in defense of certain forms of such violence—it was remarkable that only one speaker during the conference directly addressed the matter. (This was Jaime Castro, a former minister of justice of Colombia, who concluded that force was no solution to the problems of his unhappy country.) Apparently the organizers intended the lobby displays only to set the scene, to provide a comfortable framework of ideas and notions within which to locate the more sophisticated offerings inside.

On the opening night, the provost of Stanford, James Rosse, offered a general welcome, congratulating the audience on foregoing two other major attractions on campus that night: a basketball game and a lecture by Anthony Lewis. Then the main organizer of the conference, Beverly Allen, a professor of Italian at Stanford, told us that terrorism, like literature, is a "cultural artifact," and that the purpose of the conference was to "study the effects of terrorism as a concept." To do so, we needed "calm thought." We also needed to "refuse to take part in extended systems of victimization." This, presumably, was an allusion to the work of the keynote speaker, Edward Said, who, with another of the speakers, Christopher Hitchens, recently published a furious attack on Israel and the Jews entitled *Blaming the Victim*. The meaning of the title is that the Jews have successfully put over on the gullible West the notion that the Arab Palestinians have only themselves and their fellow Arabs to blame for their predicament, whereas in reality the fault lies with the Jews, whose presence in the Middle East—that is, the state of Israel itself—is the fruit of imperialist aggression and violence. Why was the West so gullible? Because, Said and Hitchens claimed, it shared with the Jews of Israel an inveterate need to destroy and oppress others for its own profit and power.

Said and Hitchens might take some comfort in the fact that this analysis is clearly no longer relevant: starting on the Left in the early 1970s, European governments and public opinion have increasingly supported the Arabs and opposed the Jews, and with the latest conflict in the Israeli-occupied territories there is good reason for Said and Hitchens to hope that the same will happen in the United States. To admit victory, how-

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ever, would deprive them of a certain notoriety. Indeed, Said's chief claim to fame is that he is a leading spokesman for a group of "victims," namely, the Palestinian Arabs; he takes pride in being a member of the governing body of the PLO, the Palestine Liberation Council. His career, furthermore, marvelously demonstrates the potential profits of victim status: an endowed chair at Columbia, six-figure job offers from Harvard and Stanford, and innumerable invitations to write, lecture, and appear on television.

If Said had given a talk on how to become rich and powerful in the intellectual world by appearing as a victim, he would have provided a more authentic and possibly more entertaining "keynote" than the one he in fact did deliver, which was an attack on what he alleged was the typical propagandistic use of the word "terror" by Western governments. Still, his talk, and indeed the entire conference, did throw an interesting light on current strategies of mobilization and indoctrination in the academy. These depend crucially on one's ability to occupy the role of victim and to denounce one's enemies as more powerful than oneself.

Said began his talk, entitled "Identity, Negation, and Violence," by ridiculing the notion that the United States was justified in bombing Libya in April, 1986. Of course, he maintained, Libya was not behind the bombing of the Berlin discotheque that offered the pretext for the raid: the United States used the popular identification of terrorism with Islam for its own anti-Arab purposes. There existed in America, he went on, an industry of terrorism, an apparatus of self-styled experts on the subject who claimed to be objective but who in fact served "to shield the U.S. from any examination of its own routinely barbaric brutalities." Among such brutalities were Israeli actions which would cease immediately if the U.S. were to stop military aid; by maintaining such aid, he said, we abet Jewish state terrorism.

In general, according to Said, the effect of the U.S. in the world was almost wholly pernicious and an offense against decency and morality. "Our side," as Said sarcastically called it, was "generally more violent" than the rest. Therefore, it was *trahison des clercs* for any person with claims to intellectual integrity to work for the U.S. government in any capacity whatsoever. The place of such a morally superior person was the university, which therefore had the noble mission of "housing oppositional clerics."

Having painted this picture of overwhelming U.S. power and viciousness, Said offered an explanation for it. The American media, he told us, were tame and loyal servants of U.S. propaganda (an assertion that might surprise, not to say offend, Dan Rather or Sam Donaldson). American government propaganda entered into an unholy symbiosis with the media, he claimed, generating spurious standards of good and evil in the world and systematically suppressing the arguments in favor of those who are depicted as evil.

How could one overcome this massive power? One way, Said explained, was to move forward in the academy along the path of "postmodernism," by which he appeared to mean a rejection of any notion that there is (or should be) agreement on what values are important or what traditions ought to be taught in universities. He expressed much satisfaction at the progress that had been made so far: core curricula, for example, were finally on the way out. Unfortunately, he acknowledged, there were certain reactionaries abroad in the land who did not like these developments and were uncomfortably popular for denouncing them: Allan Bloom, E. D. Hirsch, and Secretary of Education William Bennett. Here Said, to his audience's unconcealed delight, became sarcastic, alluding with artful pauses and throat clearings to "Bennett's—ah—[suppressed giggle]—ah—expostulations [laughter and applause]."

Rarely can the status of victim have been a more satisfying one than at that moment, since attacking Bennett in that audience required possibly less courage or skill than spearing fish in a barrel. But Said's clever-

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ness does raise again the question of the strategy behind all of this talk, and behind the attack on content in higher education. Said himself, you see, is an educated person; he, personally, will not suffer from curricular incoherence or from the new doctrine by which what were formerly called "great works" are now to be banished or else judged by the imputed value of the race or sex of their authors. He will not suffer, nor will other privileged people like him. Those who certainly will suffer, though, are the millions who naïvely believe that when a university offers an undergraduate education, it intends to educate, to provide a ballast of knowledge that can be used to make judgments in politics, in culture, in life. Without that ballast students are easy targets for indoctrination by the likes of Said, with his tales of American evil. And that, I suspect, is the purpose behind the enterprise to debunk standards and to revise the curriculum.

Said's fellow author and comrade-in-arms, Christopher Hitchens, picked up the thread the next day. Terrorism, Hitchens asserted, is a word without meaning, like "witchcraft"; it is an accusation impossible to defend against. Its only use is in a "state strategy of propaganda." Guess whose?

"I do not believe that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter," Hitchens emphasized, insisting that he was merely an innocent bystander trying to figure out what all those government types really *mean* when they say "terrorism." He had asked, he said, a number of "terrorism experts" to define "terrorist" in a way which would be neither tautological nor vacuous nor a synonym for "swarthy opponent of U.S. foreign policy." In fact, he got a very good answer from several people: namely, that terrorists deliberately use murderous force to inspire fear. Hitchens nowhere addressed this definition, however, merely passing it by as yet another attempt at propagandistic obfuscation.

In 1986, he went on, all of America was seized by "terror phobia." Lest we should wrongly think that this phobia was caused by Libyan bombs in Berlin discotheques and the like, Hitchens assured us that in fact the "phobia" was deliberately engineered by that mysterious but apparently all-powerful entity, the U.S. government propaganda machine. A year later, we saw that the "terror industry" had collapsed; this collapse showed that "its short-term political utility was at an end" so that "the concept [terrorism] was simply dropped from the state agenda of which it had once formed a part."

Hitchens then spent much energy denouncing the "appalling declension" of standards of public discourse which allowed and encouraged American propaganda to paint its enemies as "terrorists." For example, *The New Republic,* the "moral journal of record of the Reagan administration," had described a massacre in 1984 at a synagogue in Istanbul as "an example of the kind of action of which Jean-Paul Sartre would have approved." Unfortunately for Hitchens, *The New Republic* was right, since Sartre, in his notorious preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Damned of the Earth* (1961), advocated "progressive" violence against colonizers. The attack in Istanbul was on Jews, whom Hitchens quite often appears to regard as intrinsically reactionary and hence, on Sartre's principles, fair game for violence.

The word terrorism, Hitchens concluded, was an impoverishment of language. "There are other words to describe the people who do the things terrorists are supposed to do," he said. For example, "one who slits the throat of an unarmed civilian prisoner and then buries him alive while inviting an American photographer to record the scene" was the definition of a contra. "One who wages war on a democratic government in the hope of making it less democratic: fascist, anarchist, Stalinist," but the latter "only in a specific historical period." It did not occur to Hitchens to include "Communist" in the list of types of people who "wage war on a democratic government" in order to turn it into a tyranny; yet no group in modern history has done this more often or with more success than Communists, starting with Lenin and his band in Russia in 1917.

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Hitchens was nice enough to add that his definition of "contra" was "mischievous" and intended merely as an attack "on the pervading self-righteousness." What, however, shall we say of the ineffable self-righteousness of Christopher Hitchens, a self-righteousness marked by an aristocratic disdain for America and a fawning admiration of her enemies? His not-so-genteel Arabophilia and anti-Semitism, which he displayed to the full in his contribution to *Blaming the Victim,* is in the noble tradition of Harry St. John Philby and his famous son, Kim.

Hitchens granted one permissible use of the word terrorism, the use indicated by Chomsky ("a man I greatly revere") in *The Real Terror Network.* The point of that book was that the United States is the source of all evil, that its government and people are intrinsically terroristic, and that violent resistance to them is justified. Hitchens found it in himself to praise this and another work of Chomsky's as "great examples of the dethronement of hypocrisy."

In his peroration he ranged far, even managing to insult the victims of the revolutionary terror in France—the terror that, as the reader may recall, was not afraid to speak its name. "One aristocratic head under the knife," Hitchens asserted, "was real terror in a way that a thousand peasant bodies broken on the rack the year before were not. That was not terror, that was normality." Apart from being sarcastic at the expense of the memory of thousands of Frenchmen, aristocrats and otherwise, whom the revolutionaries killed merely because of their surname, their place of birth, or some chance remark they made, Hitchens's comment was also an ignorant one. There were very few "peasant bodies broken on the rack" in the years before the Revolution; indeed, harsh penalties were causes for popular indignation and complaint. If the *ancien régime* had been as harsh as Hitchens thinks, there would not have been a revolution in France, but that's another story.

In order, perhaps, to bring the conference closer to the practice of terrorism, the organizers offered a third star speaker. This was Ulrich Preuss, a leader of what his introducer described as the West German equivalent of "Critical Legal Studies." The introducer was referring to the academic movement led by American radical lawyers who maintain that there is no such thing as justice—that the law is, and can only be, a political instrument to enforce the agenda of those who are in power. Like the American colleagues to whom the introducer compared him, Preuss holds a prestigious and well-paid position in the academic legal profession of his country.

What the introducer did not say was that Preuss had been, in the 1970s, among the legal counsel of the Baader-Meinhof gang, that group of high-spirited and impatient youth who, from 1968 to 1972, and with the logistical support of various Arab and East European regimes, committed numerous murders and other acts of violence against the citizenry of European countries before they were caught and clapped in prison. Due to a desire on the part of the West German authorities not to appear in any way to hamper the prisoners' civil and human rights—a desire ironically at odds with the gang's own denunciations of the West German state as no better than the Third Reich—the security at the prison was so lax that Baader, Meinhof, and friends continued to administer, from their cells, an extensive terror network which, between 1974 and 1977, committed a series of further murders. These murders failed to achieve the desired result, namely, the release of the prisoners, who accordingly committed suicide out of what can only be described as petulant frustration in September 1977.

All that, Preuss assured us, was far away and long ago; while still sympathetic to the romantic impulses of Baader and his friends, Preuss could not "share their path" and so must now be content to travel the world first class to do what his predecessors in German legal philosophy did fifty years ago, which was to explain, with much metaphysical fanfare, why innocents had to die to satisfy

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the spiritual longings and political despair of German youth.

Preuss's talk was in some ways the most honest of them all: here, indeed, was a self-avowed friend of people most of us called terrorists getting up to justify what they did in the guise of a philosophical explanation. His method was ingenious. He began by locating the essence of terrorism in "meanings and symbols," not in the mere amount of violence or the number of victims. In case we had forgotten what Said and Hitchens taught us, Preuss hastened to remind us that all moral implications of acts of terror were "imputed by official institutions" of one kind or another. Terrorism differed from violence in general by its "political quality," which was "the threat of the use of violence to create public fear that reaches the level of a challenge to the legitimacy of political authority." In the face of this challenge, the state usually adopted a double and only seemingly contradictory strategy: on the one hand, it criminalized acts of terror as simple acts of violence, punishable under the criminal law. That strategy told the people that the terrorists were no serious challenge. On the other hand, it often over-dramatized the threat from terrorists to mobilize the people in support of repressive measures which might then be used indiscriminately against any perceived enemy.

Preuss at this point referred to one of his most illustrious, if also most notorious, predecessors in German legal thought, namely Carl Schmitt (1888-1985). Schmitt is the theorist of the "state of emergency" who is best known for his defense of Hitler's dictatorial measures after the Nazi takeover, which he said were justified by the extreme threat of civil war in Germany. Some years before those events, Schmitt had made a name for himself by his notion that the essence of "the political," that is, of political and state activity, was the distinction between friend and enemy—a distinction, Schmitt maintained, analogous to that in aesthetics between the beautiful and the ugly and in ethics between good and evil. He claimed that in traditional international relations, before the era of ideology which began in the nineteenth century, states waged war upon each other without the desire of mutual annihilation. The "enemy" in those days was simply "the other," who had to be defeated and restrained but not destroyed. Modern ideology, according to Schmitt, introduced a moralistic element, turning the morally neutral enemy into the morally evil "foe" whose eradication was a moral duty. Thanks to ideology, not only did wars become far more terrible precisely because they now included this element of moralism, but so also did domestic conflicts, which tended to become civil wars.

So far, not only is Schmitt's analysis acceptable, it arguably contains the seeds of a masterly interpretation of modern history. The problem for Schmitt on the Right and for Preuss's former friends on the Left—although Preuss himself would never say so—was that they all adopted the new moralism for themselves; they turned themselves into parties in the universal civil war. And once they did so, they of course saw their own side as uniquely moral and the other—that of democratic governments—as uniquely evil.

After the allusion to Schmitt, Preuss waxed almost poetic and spoke of the "tragedy of terrorists," imprisoned by their own obligation to be what Marx called the "heart of a heartless world." They began with a simple belief that the working class must rise and conquer the world. When the working class failed to do so, despite their urgings, they were reduced to the tragedy of "making themselves into the messianic subject of history." Their terrorism, finally, was a kind of "political theology," reflecting "the unsupportable gulf between what the terrorists know to be the right order and the means to achieve it."

It is worth pausing a moment to reflect on Preuss's rhetorical strategy, which differed so strikingly from the sarcasm of Said and Hitchens, with its winks at the audience and general sense of collusion. Preuss achieved his purpose of arguing the moral superiority of left-wing terrorism by taking what appeared to be an objective, Olympian view,

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that of the philosopher of history who understands but does not condemn. It was sometimes hard, amidst all of this rhetoric, to hold fast to the two most important facts about the real subject under discussion: that terrorists kill innocents on purpose; and that they intend the destruction of Western democracy.

A useful antidote to the pernicious nonsense of "Talking 'Terrorism'" is to be found in a new book by Jean-François Revel entitled *Le terrorisme contre la démocratie.*[1] The title, in a way, says it all: that terrorists are the enemy of democracy, which is really all the normal citizen should need to know about them. But because of the deliberate and hypocritically partisan elucubrations of people like Said and Hitchens, the normal citizen may need more. He may need to be armed against the "persistent belief, notwithstanding the masses of information to the contrary, that in essence, despite some exceptions, it [terrorism] is the weapon of the weak against the strong, the final argument of the oppressed against the dictators." This, *pace* Said and company, is a lie. "Whatever may have been the case in the past, today terrorism in its quasi-totality has become a weapon turned against the democracies. It does not matter whether it has the clear aim of destroying them: the results are there, and the statistical reality speaks for itself." Most important, Revel adds:

> The spread of terrorism from country to country is inversely related to each country's repressiveness . . . . The Peruvian Shining Path chose to go on the attack in 1980 the very day of the first democratic elections in that country in almost two decades . . . . In seven years, the Shining Path killed about 10,000 people out of a population of 19 million . . . . In Europe, the Basque country offers a striking example of terrorism progressing in direct proportion to the progress of democracy . . . . There is a technical reason to prefer practicing terrorism in the democracies: it's easy. And there is a political reason: more than other regimes, they are vulnerable to threats . . . . In addition, one should not underestimate the diffuse hatred of the democratic and developed world, precisely because it is democratic and developed, nor should one underestimate the dexterity with which the Soviet Union and its clients are able to attract this hatred and turn it toward their own geostrategic ends.

As if anticipating Said's and Hitchens's contention that terrorism is only a propagandistic label because our violence is much worse, Revel makes the concise point: "The distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence does not hang on the personal opinions of the terrorist but on the nature of the regime he is attacking and of the society in which he operates." Revel concludes most devastatingly with a remark that even Hitchens, with his legendary ability to evade hard questions, might have trouble with: "How can one compare the resistance fighters of old who gave their lives to restore democracy to the violent of today who take the lives of others for its destruction?"

What lessons can one draw from an event like "Talking 'Terrorism'"? Three come to mind. The first surely is that the condition of our culture and in particular of our universities must be truly pathetic if one can take it completely for granted, *and be right,* that a university conference on terrorism arranged by professors of the humanities will exonerate progressive terror and condemn the policies of democratic states as themselves terroristic. The second is that the American academic Left has apparently shed the last vestiges of its liberal façade, its former commitment to at least the pretense of open debate. Its new approach, although arrogant, must conceal a fundamental insecurity if even in front of a tame audience the Left dares not take up the cudgels and have it out in public with a strong opponent like Revel. Sidney Hook, who is writing elsewhere about the Stanford event, asked the organizers why there was no one to represent a point of view different from that of Said, Hitchens,

1 Hachette, Paris, 1987, 170 pages.

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and Preuss. The answer he got was: "Well, you are welcome to ask questions."

It is as though the Left has lost the courage of its earlier convictions in direct proportion to the power it has gained in American academe. Now, when no one can seriously threaten its power, it refuses to enter the battle of ideologies. Twenty years ago, the Left prided itself on being the party of ideas, the party of originality, and above all the party of good intellectual debate and fun. Now it is the party of stuffy orthodoxy, of paralyzed timidity of mind, and of desperate, puritanical seriousness. And this timidity goes along with a hardening of attitudes, a rapidly increasing intolerance, and an overt surrender of any notion that intellectuals are or should be part of the liberal tradition. The strategy is remarkably simple. By denying that the Western cultural tradition is either useful or valuable, you absolve yourself of any obligation to be either tolerant, fair, or logical in what you do, since an important part of that tradition is the respect for opposing viewpoints and for logic and rigor in argument.

The third lesson of "Talking 'Terrorism'" is that this anti-intellectualism in the humanities today, exemplified by activities such as the conference, will inevitably have—indeed, already has had—a terrible effect both on students and on the culture at large. Students learn that all scholarship is political, and that to study the humanities is to commit oneself to a particular ideology. They learn, also, that what is important is not the worth of an argument or the record of Western cultural history itself but rather the political position, the race or sex or the power of those who make the arguments. Students do not learn to make the most elementary political or philosophical distinctions, distinctions they need to be able to make whether their own preferences turn out to be radical, liberal, or conservative. To make such distinctions takes, in the first place, knowledge; and it takes the powers of reasoned reflection and mature judgment that humanities departments formerly prided themselves on supplying. They no longer supply them, because to do so would be to deliver to students the intellectual tools that would lead to a questioning of radical orthodoxy.

What we have in the humanities today is not pluralism but the threat of a dogmatic monopoly—a monopoly not of radicals genuinely committed to presenting viewpoints that otherwise might not be heard but of anti-intellectual radicals masquerading as what Said called "oppositional clerics." The irony is that Said was right; the universities do indeed have a duty to protect "oppositional clerics." But they are not doing so. Instead, their administrators, trustees, and faculty are busy dismantling what little remains of humanistic higher education in America and replacing it with a one-dimensional view of man and of culture that tolerates no opposition.

The anti-intellectual hegemony is a fact. The question of what should be done in response remains.

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Marsden Hartley: at home and abroad

by Karen Wilkin

Marsden Hartley is one of our best painters, but not long ago he could have been described as an enigmatic presence in the history of this country's art. Not that he was unrecognized. Quite the contrary, but he was known for a fraction of his work. We knew him as a pioneer modernist, a member of the Stieglitz circle, an expatriate who went to Europe early in this century and spent much of his life abroad. We knew that he returned to America toward the end of his life to find new subject matter in the harsh landscape and vigorous people of his native New England. Or something like that. Our awareness of Hartley's development as a painter and our sense of him as an individual remained vague. Surprisingly, no major study of his life and work appeared until 1980, when the Whitney Museum of American Art mounted a full-scale retrospective and published Barbara Haskell's biographical catalogue.

Since then, Hartley material has proliferated. A short monograph is promised by Abbeville Press this year and a catalogue raisonné is in preparation. Nineteen eighty-two saw Gail R. Scott's edition of Hartley's passionate writings on art and the first publication of the even more passionate prose-poem, *Cleophas and His Own,* Hartley's "North Atlantic tragedy," a thinly disguised recollection of his idyllic stays with a family of Nova Scotia fishermen. Two years ago, Scott edited a collection of Hartley's poems, last published in 1945. The essays on art, many in print for the first time, revealed Hartley as an articulate, thoughtful observer; the poems and *Cleophas,* begun in 1936 and found among Hartley's effects after his death, exposed him as a man of heart-wrenching feeling.

These days, Hartley's life story is almost more familiar than his art. It's understandable. He is a difficult, complex artist, not an easy painter to "get," while his biography is compelling stuff. A picture emerges of a cantankerous man, fiercely loyal but demanding and able to antagonize—as well as charm—even the most devoted friends. Hartley shuttled restlessly between the United States and Europe, often impoverished, frequently lonely, a self-proclaimed outsider in touch with many of the most inventive artists and writers of his time. He seemed unable to choose between his wish for rural isolation and his desire for a stimulating urban existence, and equally unable to reconcile his attachment to his own country with his preference, as a modernist artist and a homosexual, for life in Europe. His career progressed erratically; recognition was intermittent, and even modest financial success waited until his last years. His few emotionally charged, nourishing friendships ended tragically. His unease, his disappointment, his fragility are all too apparent.

Knowing this sort of thing can heighten our perception of Hartley's achievement or even enrich our experience of his art. It doesn't hurt to know, for example, that his

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German Military abstractions—those familiar, congested paintings with their heraldic patterns of red, black, and white—were a response to the atmosphere of Europe at the start of World War I and sometimes intended as memorials to a young Prussian officer, killed in early action, to whom Hartley was deeply attached. The potent, late "imaginary portraits" are illuminated in the same way by *Cleophas and His Own.* Hartley greatly admired the entire Francis Mason family described in the poem, but one of the strapping sons was among the most important—and perhaps the happiest—attachments of his life. When the young man, his brother, and their cousin were drowned in a storm, Hartley, devastated, mourned them in *Cleophas* and in a series of icon-like paintings that were an attempt to fix forever his memories and strong feelings about the family.

It's all fascinating and stirs our interest and compassion, but it doesn't help us to decide how good any of Hartley's paintings are. Just as the legends of Van Gogh's severed ear, his illness, and his suicide have obscured his art, the particulars of Hartley's story can make his painting harder to see, rather than make it more legible. At best, Hartley is in danger of being mythologized. At worst, his pictures risk being viewed as adjuncts to psychodrama.

That was precisely the problem with the absorbing and enraging exhibition, "Marsden Hartley and Nova Scotia," organized by Gerald Ferguson, a conceptual artist affiliated with the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, in Halifax, and a devoted admirer of Hartley's.[1] (Ferguson was responsible for the 1982 publication of *Cleophas.*) The exhibition raised high expectations. The time Hartley spent on an island near the fishing community of Blue Rocks, Nova Scotia, in 1935 and 1936, was clearly critical. His wholehearted esteem and affection for the Mason family, their enthusiasm for him, and the boys' tragic deaths became sources for Hartley's painting and writing for much of the rest of his career. Perhaps more important, the pictures provoked by his stays with the Masons are some of Hartley's best. And the Nova Scotia material had never before been assembled. Alas, despite Ferguson's impeccable intentions and evident sympathy for Hartley, the exhibition was disappointing. Instead of using Hartley's letters, journal entries, and poems to illuminate his art, Ferguson treated Hartley's paintings like illustrations.

Ferguson did succeed in assembling many of the works most intimately bound up with Hartley's Nova Scotia experiences. The memory portraits of "Cleophas" and his family were there: "Cleophas" himself, as Hartley called Francis Mason in his writings, with his slab-like hands and seamed face; his son "Adelard the Drowned," with a rose behind his ear and wild, upstanding hair; "Adelard's" sister, with breasts like armor, enthroned like a Byzantine madonna against portraits of her dead brothers; their mother, all greys, blacks, and whites, with hands like paws. One of Hartley's celebrated group portraits of the bereaved family, *Fishermen's Last Supper,* 1938, completed the series. Later sketches of the family, schematic shorthand characterizations done about seven years after the drownings, bore witness to Hartley's obsession with the Masons. A few superb, stormy land and seascapes demonstrated that Hartley felt as intensely about the rugged Nova Scotia coast as he did about its hardworking people.

Yet key works were missing. The most conspicuous lack was the second, 1940-41, version of *Fishermen's Last Supper,* from the collection of Roy R. Neuberger (admittedly reproduced in the catalogue), but there were other notable omissions. Nova Scotia landscapes that Hartley repeated many times

1 "Marsden Hartley and Nova Scotia" was on view at the Mt. St. Vincent University Art Gallery at Halifax from October 23 to November 22, 1987, and at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto from January 16 to March 13, 1988. The exhibition was organized by Gerald Ferguson, who is also the editor of the catalogue (Mt. St. Vincent University Art Gallery, 182 pages, $21.95 in paperback).

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were represented by a single version of each motif. Borrowing works, particularly for travelling exhibitions, always presents difficulties, so there are undoubtedly excellent reasons why the pictures were missing, but since Hartley often worked serially, returning obsessively to images that had special resonance for him, and since the Nova Scotia land- and seascapes are almost certainly as much memorial images as any of the portraits, their absence distorted the show.

The problem was compounded by the inclusion of tenuously related or minor items that shifted the exhibition's emphasis away from Hartley at his best. The weak (if famous) *Give Us This Day,* 1938-39, a portrayal, the label told us, of the Masons at dinner with Hartley at their table, disguised as seagulls, seemed prominent beyond its worth in that context, as did *Nova Scotia Fishermen,* 1938, with its dead color and spotty surface. (The picture looks rather like a hooked rug, which raises questions about Hartley's interest in this lively maritime folk tradition; he collected German primitive painting, after all.)

Both works seemed to have been included because of fairly explicit references in Hartley's writings rather than for their inherent merits, but no one could doubt their Nova Scotia genesis. Other inclusions were more problematic. A painting of starfish and shells was accompanied by a similar drawing, with the explanation that Hartley did many drawings of beach litter while at Blue Rocks; a quotation from one of his letters supported the point. But there are many such paintings from Hartley's last decade, painted in Bermuda, Maine, and elsewhere. He plainly liked the way things washed up on a beach were isolated against the background of sand—with few exceptions, in fact, these "sea wrack" canvases seem like exercises in placement—but the series is not specially linked to Nova Scotia. The most far-fetched (but in many ways welcome) inclusion was *Roses,* a fine still life of a giant bouquet, found on Hartley's easel when he died in 1943. Its presence made Hartley's real strength evident, even though there is no convincing reason to connect the picture to Nova Scotia, other than the choice of flower. Ferguson makes much of roses in his catalogue, from the wreaths floated out to sea in memory of lost sailors—which Hartley painted—to the flower behind "Adelard's" ear. The label identified the rose as "that symbol so closely associated with the Masons" and maintained that "*Roses* is a transcendent bouquet, not a funerary wreath, which suggests, along with his last correspondence, that Hartley had come to terms with the past and his own imminent death." Quite apart from the leap in logic, what about the similarity between this bouquet and Hartley's other flower paintings, done both before and after his visits to Nova Scotia?

The labels were uniformly maddening. Photographs of a Nova Scotia site that figured in Hartley's work were accompanied by the helpful warning: "Since the drawing and painting are both subjective interpretations of place, a site photograph can only be an approximation." Thanks. First prize goes to the text accompanying a peculiar 1936 oil, *Roses for a Provincial Fisherman Lost at Sea.* The centralized, over-scaled "portrait" of a communion chalice, uncannily like the pictures of cocktail glasses Hartley painted twenty years earlier, was compared to the memory portraits of "Cleophas" and "Adelard": ". . . each have [sic] a rose as a symbolic token which is foregrounded in the title of this painting."

The catalogue, edited by Ferguson, was more coherent than the exhibition. It gathered together essays ranging from Ronald Paulson's provocative Freudian interpretation of Hartley's imagery to Gail Scott's meticulous tracking of the origins of *Cleophas* to Roald Nasgaard's thoughtful discussion of Hartley as symbolist. The catalogue also includes the text of *Cleophas,* excerpts from Hartley's letters, journals, and poems, and newly published photographs of Hartley and the Masons. Unfortunately, the arrangement of reproductions echoes the exhibition's fundamental weakness; they are subordinated to the text and distributed in a way that makes it all but impossible to find

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anything easily or to tell just what was in the show. Text, once again, takes precedence.

Hartley deserves better. Happily, he received more satisfying representation in two recent New York shows, "The Last Decade," at Vanderwoude/Tananbaum Gallery, and a mini-retrospective (their second in two years) at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries.[2] "The Last Decade," whose title promised more than it delivered, nonetheless displayed some important paintings, including several that would have enriched the Nova Scotia show. A stunning "Canadian" portrait, *Madewaska —Acadian Light Heavy, 3rd Arrangement,* 1940, would have been a fascinating foil to the portraits of the male Masons. Two of "The Last Decade" paintings, in fact, a beach litter composition and the odd, cartoon-like *Eight Bells Folly—Memorial for Hart Crane,* 1933, were reproduced in Ferguson's catalogue. The latter, with its fierce shark mouth and full rigged sailing ship beneath moonlit clouds, clearly prefigures the stormy seascapes that Hartley painted after the boys' deaths. (In the highly charged Nova Scotia pictures, menacing, jagged rocks take the place of the shark, much to the benefit of the paintings.) The differences between *Eight Bells Folly* and the Nova Scotia seascapes point to a key issue in Hartley's work: his need to reconcile his preoccupation with symbols with his sense of structure. The Nova Scotia exhibition lacked precisely this kind of visual comparison.

Conversely, the chance to make comparisons was the best thing about the two New York shows. At Vanderwoude/Tananbaum, for example, two paintings of Bavarian Alps made clear the importance of the relation of image to the shape and proportion of the canvas in Hartley's best work. The inspired color, in one version, was arresting enough, but it was the compressed space of the narrow, vertical canvas that made the mountain loom up and press forward. The tense, dramatic picture criticized its companion piece whose wider format dissipated the upward thrust of its subject. At Salander-O'Reilly, an abstraction of the German Military type, *Paris Days—Pre-War,* 1914 (still in Hartley's own integrated polychrome frame), was juxtaposed with a related work of 1913, *The Warriors.* They shared a pyramidal, symmetrical composition, possibly derived from a military helmet, and a simplified palette of near-primaries, but in *The Warriors,* the generating images of mounted officers remained more or less intact, although forced into a repeated pattern. The painting demanded to be read like a rebus, but never became really lucid. The layout suggested Tantric votive images, complete with curly clouds in the center and rows of rounded red "haloes," but these red shapes proved to be the rumps of the warriors' horses and seemed slightly silly. Even though the imagery was less specific, the detached, clashing shapes and emblematic patterns of *Paris Days* were far more evocative.

What made the abstract picture, with its overtones of heraldry and American Indian art, better than *The Warriors,* with its freight of undigested oriental mysticism, had nothing to do with abstraction or figuration. (Hartley is arguably not an abstract painter at all.) It was more a question of focus and diffusion, of the way *Paris Days* depended on clear visual logic while *The Warriors* required a near-literary reading of images less interesting for themselves than for what they alluded to. Hartley's most powerful pictures, whether still lifes, landscapes, figures, or abstractions, share a hieratic intensity that results not so much from imagery as from austere composition, from insistent frontality, from saturated color, dense, brushy surfaces, and great clarity. Confronted by a room full of these still, solemn pictures, we are not surprised to learn that Hartley once travelled to Arezzo, especially to see Piero

2 "Marsden Hartley: The Last Decade" was on display at Vanderwoude/Tananbaum Gallery in New York from January 13 to February 27. "Marsden Hartley" was on view at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries from January 8 to February 27 and was accompanied by a catalogue with an essay by Lawrence Salander, published by Daniel Skira & Co. (41 plates, $20).

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della Francesca's frescos, which stunned him.

Density, fresco-like airlessness, and, above all, frontality seem peculiar to Hartley, no matter what his approach. Throughout his flirtation with Cubism, his self-imposed apprenticeship to Cézanne, and his forays into a tightly controlled expressionism, he remained faithful to confrontational compositions that seem to bulk forward from the center of the canvas. At Salander-O'Reilly we could see this as early as 1913 and 1914, in the two military paintings, and a few years later, in a series of crisp, chalky still lifes of stemmed glasses. In "The Last Decade," the robust physique of *Madewaska* was barely contained by the canvas. And many other works in both shows, from beach litter paintings to views of the Bavarian Alps and Mt. Katahdin, in Hartley's native Maine, shared this arresting centrality. Paulson's essay in the catalogue of "Marsden Hartley and Nova Scotia" attempts to come to grips with this phenomenon, discussing Hartley's habits of composition in terms of phallic obsession and, at the same time, connecting them to the Abstract Expressionists' search for single, iconic, abstract images. It's good reading, even if it doesn't explain why many of Hartley's paintings with scattered, horizontal forms, such as the Dogtown Common series or the New Mexico Recollections, are as good as they are, nor does it account for the awkwardness of most of his paintings of Cézanne's beloved (and vertical) Mt. Ste. Victoire, but that is a hazard of treating paintings like symptoms.

Lawrence Salander's essay, in the catalogue of the Salander-O'Reilly exhibit, poses quite different questions, about Hartley's relationship to modernist French art, in general, and Léger, in particular, claiming a similarity between the German Military abstractions and Léger's "tubist" abstractions of about the same time. There is no doubt that Hartley, for all his fondness for Germany and his warm reception by the members of the German Expressionist movement, was well informed about the most advanced painting in prewar France—he was a regular at Gertrude Stein's by 1912—but the comparison with Léger seems superficial. Unlike the paintings of his Cubist colleagues, Hartley's canvases have no fluctuating spaces, no transparent, overlapping planes. Instead, they are jammed full of flattened, symbolic fragments—bits of bunting, service stripes, the Iron Cross. In contrast, Léger's tubist paintings are spatially clear and articulate. They may employ colors and shapes similar to Hartley's, but they are used to heighten the illusionism of Léger's angling cylinders. Hartley's stripes remain stripes.

If exhibitions and catalogues raise more questions than they answer, it's not remarkable. Hartley becomes more elusive the more we know, the more we look. Contradictions abound. The long-time European resident always insisted on his Americanness. It wasn't simply the expedient posture of an expatriate returning to an isolationist country, but a recurring theme in his writings. Certainly, Hartley's New England landscapes, his repeated views of Mt. Katahdin and the rocky Maine coast speak for a profound sense of connectedness, yet distance often seems to count as much as proximity. The superheated deserts of the New Mexico Recollections were painted long after Hartley left the American Southwest; the vivid characterizations of the Mason family were begun not from life but from memory and finished years after Hartley's last visits to Nova Scotia. His careful paintings of Mt. Ste. Victoire, on the other hand, were done on the spot and seem stiff and arid. And so on. A journal entry quoted in Ferguson's catalogue reinforces the point. Ostensibly a recounting of a conversation with "Cleophas," it turns into a rapturous account of an orange blossom harvest in the South of France. Could the peripatetic Hartley deal best with things he cared about at one remove?

Hartley's writings, for all the insight they can provide, don't necessarily clarify the contradictions. The very style of his prose can add to the confusion, since the voice of

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the autodidact Hartley has cadences of some of the most sophisticated writers of his time, such as his friend Gertrude Stein. And you can't always believe what he says. He wrote in 1928: "Personal art is for me a matter of spiritual indelicacy . . . . I am interested only in the problem of painting, of how to make a better painting according to certain laws that are inherent to the making of a good picture—and not at all in the private extraversions or introversions of specific individuals . . . ." And later: "I have joined, once and for all, the ranks of the intellectual experimentalists. I can hardly bear the sound of the words 'expressionism,' 'emotionalism,' 'personality,' and such, because they imply the wish to express personal life and I prefer to have no personal life."

Hartley's art gives the lie to these protestations. His best paintings are full of passionate emotion, although, as with Cézanne, it is emotion channeled and disciplined. Cézanne diverted the romanticism and expressionism of his first pictures into a ferocious scrutiny of form, transforming his early bacchanals and allegories into slowly arrived at relationships of plane to plane. Hartley was no less adept at dissembling emotion, but his impulse was to consolidate and simplify, to make large, essential shapes —rather than small nuances of tone—the equivalents of his strongest perceptions and deepest feelings. It took Hartley most of his working life to assemble his full vocabulary, in what he called "the education of an artist," but with the advantage of hindsight, we can easily recognize the earmarks of his personality in even his wildest detours. His tendency to bring everything up to surface, his biting color, with lights and brights wrested out of enveloping darkness, his dry, brushy surfaces, and his vigorous touch are all characteristic and consistent. Hartley's "education of an artist" was, inevitably, a quest for self.

The best Hartleys seem inevitable, immutable. Their frail, errant author admired solidity and stability, as we know from what he praised in the artists he liked best, artists who ranged from the American mystic Albert Pinkham Ryder to the Renaissance rationalist Piero della Francesca, including, of course, Hartley's fellow New Englander, John Marin. Writing about Marin's work, Hartley said: "The earth has body, the sea has body, the sail has strength, the island remains fixed in the sea, and the houses are set on their islands where generations of islanders have lived, moved, and had their peculiar beings." He could have been writing about his own view of Nova Scotia. For once, he is completely believable.

Hartley admired robustness, as we know from his poems and the few pictures of heroic young men that he permitted himself toward the end of his life. No contradiction there; heightened physicality pervades all of his best painting. When we see him most clearly, the pioneer modernist looks immediate, intense, and utterly contemporary.

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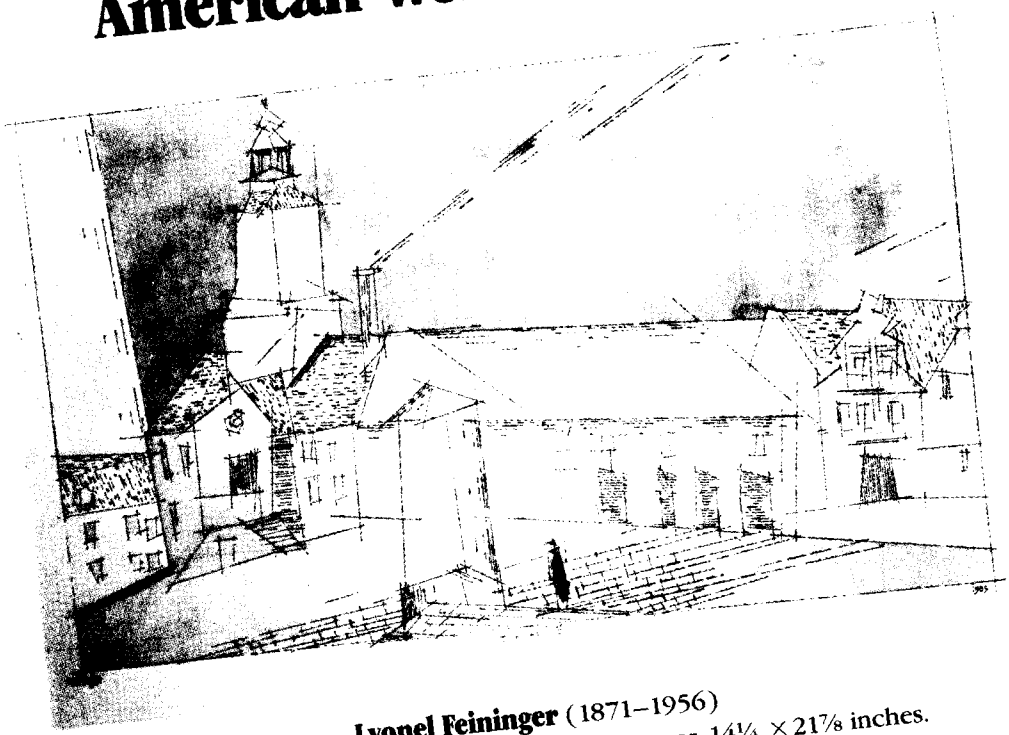
American Works on Paper



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Is MOMA attempting suicide?

by Roger Kimball

Among the many problems that anyone interested in contemporary art faces when attempting to write or talk about it critically today is a semantic problem. Many of the basic terms of discourse—terms like "art," "museum," "artist," "genius," "important," "major"—have accumulated new meanings, meanings that are not so much extensions as perversions or even contradictions of their traditional meanings. Naturally, this makes for great confusion and ambiguity, for it is not always clear whether the accounts one reads of various events in the art world are using these basic terms in the old, familiar sense, some new sense, or—as it sometimes seems—a promiscuous blend of the old and new. One is then in the exasperated situation of Dickens's Mr. Pickwick, who found himself at a loss to know whether he was being addressed as "a humbug" in the common sense of the word, or whether the term was meant in a special, Pickwickian sense. Perhaps this is the place to assure the reader that in this essay the word "humbug," at least, will be used only in its common, everyday sense.

I wish I could be so reassuring about the other words: "art," "artist," "museum," and the like. But my subject—three of the exhibitions that were featured in the Museum of Modern Art's recent "Contemporary Art in Context" program[1]—makes this assurance impossible. In fact, as regards the exhibitions I shall examine here—"Committed to Print: Social and Political Themes in Recent American Printed Art," "Picturing 'Greatness,'" and "Vito Acconci: Public Places"[2]—it seems clear that such terms must be construed in a decidedly Pickwickian sense. How else is one to understand the museum's offering "Committed to Print," which hitherto would have been described as a jumble of unadorned political propaganda without

1 "Contemporary Art in Context" consisted of a week-long series of lectures, videos, panel discussions, and gallery talks by artists and critics held at the Museum of Modern Art from February 29 through March 5. The program took as its occasion five exhibitions at the museum. In addition to the three I discuss one will find Donald Sultan's "Black Lemons," works in charcoal on paper depicting the familiar fruit (on view through May 3), and Rosemarie Trockel's "Projects" (through April 3).

2 "Committed to Print: Social and Political Themes in Recent American Printed Art" is on view through April 19. It was organized by Deborah Wye, Associate Curator of Prints and Illustrated Books, who also wrote the accompanying catalogue by the same title, which was published by the Museum of Modern Art (120 pages, $12.50). "Picturing 'Greatness,'" an exhibition of photographic portraits of artists, was organized by the artist and guest curator Barbara Kruger and closes March 29; no catalogue accompanied the exhibition. "Public Places," on view through May 3, was organized by Linda Shearer, Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture; the catalogue, *Vito Acconci: Public Places,* written by Miss Shearer, is also published by the Museum of Modern Art (32 pages, $9.95).

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a shred of aesthetic interest, as an example of "Contemporary Art in Context"? How else can one explain the museum's support of an exhibition like "Picturing 'Greatness,'" whose very premises militate against the allegiance to aesthetic quality that the museum was founded to champion and preserve? How else can one understand an exhibition (a "major exhibition," as a museum press release put it) of the banal, playground-like concoctions that Vito Acconci has the audacity to present as public sculpture? How else, indeed, can one account for the fact that Mr. Acconci is generally accepted as an *artist* of any description? And finally, what is one to make of the Museum of Modern Art itself? What does this venerable institution's support of programs like "Contemporary Art in Context" tell us about its role as an art museum? Must that, too, increasingly be understood in a Pickwickian sense? Or—not to put too fine a point on the matter—is it all only so much . . . humbug?

Let us begin with "Committed to Print: Social and Political Themes in Recent American Printed Art." The title itself deserves some scrutiny. "Committed" is obviously used punningly to suggest "politically committed" as well as "set down for reference." As a glance at the exhibition makes clear, the only "social and political themes" we are treated to are left-liberal and radical themes: this is what it means to put art in "context" today. Hence, it is not surprising that "American" is used solely to designate provenance, not to evoke the character or spirit of the work, which with a handful of exceptions could only be described as adamantly anti-American. By "recent" we are meant to understand the last twenty-five years or so—the ethos of the Sixties and its aftermath. And with the word "art"—well, here we are back in the land of Mr. Pickwick, for the one thing that the agglomeration of objects collected in those pristine first-floor galleries at the Museum of Modern Art assuredly is not is art.

Instead, the Modern has offered us a miscellaneous collection of one hundred and forty-four prints or posters and thirty-six "artist books"—or perhaps one should say artist "books" or even "artist" books: the last seems in many ways the most appropriate, though there is something to recommend putting scare quotes around "books," too, since most of the items so designated were little more than crudely illustrated political pamphlets. In any case, the material on view was produced by one hundred and eight individuals and sixteen "collectives." The curator, Deborah Wye, begins her introduction to the catalogue accompanying the exhibition with the unarguable observation that it is "the leftist or liberal point of view which dominates the works in this study." Whether it is also true, as she goes on to remark, that "in fact, throughout the history of printed art with social and political themes, a leftist slant has predominated" is a good question. It would be worth digging into this assertion a little, asking exactly what Miss Wye might mean by "leftist or liberal"—are they synonymous?—and whether she believes that the words meant the same thing, say, in the nineteenth or even the early twentieth century as they do today; then, too, it would be interesting to know what "leftist" could possibly mean when applied to an even earlier time—to the fifteenth century, for example, since Miss Wye continues on the same page to invoke the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and "printed works by Hieronymus Bosch, Pieter Bruegel, Lucas Cranach," which, she assures us, had "powerful propaganda value" in their day. By adverting to such illustrious names, she no doubt hopes to suggest that some of the material she has collected in "Committed to Print" might be regarded as achieving a similarly exalted combination of artistic luster and "propaganda value."

While the hope is a vain one, Miss Wye has certainly been diligent about making sure that the roster of participants includes a suitable proportion of what we might call "brand-name" artists: Leon Golub, Barbara Kruger, Hans Haacke, Robert Rauschenberg are here, as are Frank Stella, Judy

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Chicago, Jasper Johns, Vito Acconci, and of course Andy Warhol, who may be said to belong to any such group *ex officio*. There are also dozens of lesser known or unknown names represented, as well as several mercifully evanescent "collectives" with attractive titles like "Artists and Writers Protest Against the War in Vietnam," "Black Emergency Cultural Coalition," "Guerrilla Art Action Group," and "Sisters of Survival."

Miss Wye has divided the exhibition into six main categories: Governments and Leaders; Race and Culture; Gender; Nuclear Power and Ecology; War and Revolution; Economics, Class Struggle, and the American Dream. The great virtue of these categories is not that they impose any real order on the mélange of objects on view—many items could fit as well into one category as the next—but that they establish the appropriate mental atmosphere for approaching the exhibition. One sees "Governments and Leaders" and is cued to think "corrupt"; "Race and Culture" means "oppression"; "Gender" means "sexism"; and so on. The associations are practically Pavlovian in their predictability.

As some critics have already observed, the truly remarkable thing about the exhibition is that it has managed to gather together in one place virtually every leftist cliché from the past twenty-five years. I can't think of a single countercultural sentiment that has been allowed to molder in well-deserved oblivion; images and themes and gestures that one had thought were safely buried have been disinterred and carefully mounted. *Mirabile visu*, someone actually preserved all those posters and pamphlets from the Sixties! All the detritus about the Vietnam War, the posturing about cultural revolution, the pious outcry against nuclear energy, the unthinking anti-bourgeois animus applied to every aspect of American life: it's all here, displayed neatly on the walls and exhibition cases of the Museum of Modern Art.

Thus we have Andy Warhol's famous *Vote McGovern* silkscreen (1972), which features a picture of Richard Nixon with the words "Vote McGovern" scrawled underneath; Barbara Kruger's poster *We Get Exploded Because They've Got Money and God in Their Pockets* (1984), which features a picture of a boxer being hit in the face and the words of the title splashed over the surface as if it were a cigarette advertisement; and Mark di Suvero's anti-war collage that begins with a headline accusing President Johnson of being a murderer. There are other delights, too. Mary Beth Edelson's *Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper* (1972), for example, a feminist parody of Leonardo's *The Last Supper*. "By choosing an artistic and religious masterpiece and inhabiting it with women," Miss Wye comments, "Edelson makes a statement about the male-dominated systems of art history and organized religion." What sort of statement? As Miss Edelson put it herself, remarking on some of her other work: "The purpose . . . was to address the moral and physical (ecological) decay of the patriarchal system, whether religious or secular, and to indicate by using women as activators that the need to reintegrate the feminine is paramount to a new paradigm to replace the outlived patriarchy." One has to have a grudging respect for the seamlessness of the rhetoric, utterly impervious as it is to any intrusions from common sense.

Nor is it simply the political sentiments of the objects corralled in these galleries that are clichéd and muddle-headed. While it is inappropriate to discuss *any* of the materials on view here as works of art, it might at least be mentioned that visually, too, they represent a veritable inventory of tired and heavy-handed graphic gestures from the Thirties on down. Some pieces make use of various modernist techniques; some employ the slick motifs of contemporary advertising; most are crudely conceived and executed. But the essential thing to grasp about the exhibition is that aesthetic categories are entirely out of place in discussing it. "Committed to Print" is not an *art* exhibition at all. It is a collection of political propaganda. As such, the exhibition testifies to the increasingly widespread ambition to subordinate art to a species of social history, to

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jettison the whole notion of an independent realm of aesthetic endeavor in favor of political and social attitudinizing that draws upon the gestures and prestige of art to increase its visibility. What matters is not the artistic achievement but having the "correct" political perspective. But the question remains, of course, whether it is appropriate for an institution like the Museum of Modern Art to be in the business of aiding and abetting political propaganda.

At the end of her introductory essay, Miss Wye rousingly concludes that "these prints can help us locate meaning in seemingly incomprehensible events of daily life by removing the actuality to a mythic plane." Let us agree that most of the works in this exhibition, whatever their documentary "content," are by virtue of their political and social naïveté far removed from actuality. But to invoke "the mythic" in the context of this grubby panoply is sophistical nonsense. Pious and clichéd, not mythic, are the *mots justes.* Reflecting on the exhibition, I found myself returning again and again to one piece: Louise Bourgeois's *No* (1973), a photostatic print with the terse negative emblazoned in different sizes and typefaces over the surface. The catalogue informs us that the image derives from a ten-foot banner that Bourgeois designed in 1973 for the striking employees of the Museum of Modern Art. Notwithstanding its origin, the piece emerged as my favorite object in the exhibition, not because I particularly admired its aesthetic qualities—which admittedly are modest—but because it so perfectly summed up my reaction to the presentation: No, No, No, No, No.

At first blush, we seem to have returned to normalcy when we walk upstairs to the Edward Steichen Photography Center to see "Picturing 'Greatness.'" Unlike "Committed to Print," "Picturing 'Greatness'" is a quiet exhibition. Drawn entirely from the museum's own collection, it presents thirty-nine photographic portraits of various well-known artists by distinguished photographers. Many of the images are familiar. Among the best known photographs on view are Robert Capa's portraits of Matisse and Picasso, Man Ray's portraits of Cocteau, Duchamp, and Picasso, Hans Namuth's of Jackson Pollock, Edward Steichen's of Rodin and Brancusi, and Alfred Stieglitz's of his wife, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Charles Demuth. It's all perfectly staid and, in fact, a bit boring—until one contemplates the curatorial considerations that inform the exhibition.

For while the content of "Picturing 'Greatness'" is unexceptionable, the *context* (to use that word currently so favored by the museum) is every bit as inimical to traditional aesthetic values as "Committed to Print." Once again, the title of the exhibition is revealing. Much is expressed by those surprising quotation marks around the word "greatness." They are meant to call into question both the idea that there is such a thing as superlative artistic achievement and the contention that a Picasso or a Matisse or a Brancusi might legitimately be said to exemplify such achievement; above all, those knowing quotation marks are meant to call into question the notion that there is such a thing as aesthetic quality that cannot be explained as a sociological datum or reduced to a coefficient of external social forces.

The artist Barbara Kruger, whom the Museum of Modern Art invited to act as guest curator for the show, is an old hand at insinuating this sort of corrosive irony into art. No doubt her tenure in the art department at *Mademoiselle* magazine taught her how to combine everyday images and catchy verbal tags to capture attention. But now, instead of selling make-up, panty hose, and the dream of endless adolescent romance, she is selling pre-packaged feminist denunciations of a world populated by such terrible things as money, advertising, and a male-dominated art world—not to speak of make-up, panty hose, and the dream of endless adolescent romance. What she peddles as art are still advertisements—photographs with clever legends informing us, for example, that "We Won't Play Nature to Your Culture"—only now her price is much

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higher and her exhortations more strident.

Given Miss Kruger's talents and proclivities, it was only natural that she should hit upon the idea of mounting an ironic exhibition of photographs of great modern artists; and it was likewise to be expected that it would be an exhibition in which the quality of the photographs—though it happens to be high—is subordinate to the ideology that gave birth to the idea. The aim of the exhibition is not to provide the public with a display of photographic art; still less is it to memorialize or pay homage to the artists on view. On the contrary, Miss Kruger has drawn upon the aura of these great photographers to help undermine the idea of artistic greatness and subtly erode the stature of the artists they pictured.

The sensibility governing "Picturing 'Greatness'" is summed up in the wall label that Miss Kruger provided to accompany the exhibition. "Though many of these images exude a kind of well-tailored gentility," we read near the beginning of the text,

> others feature the artist as a star-crossed Houdini with a beret on, a kooky middleman between God and the public. Vibrating with inspiration yet implacably well behaved, visceral yet oozing with all manner of refinement, almost all are male and almost all are white. These images of artistic "greatness" are from the collection of this museum. As we tend to become who we are through a dense crush of allowances and denials, inclusions and absences, we can begin to see how approval is accorded through the languages of "greatness," that heady brew concocted with a slice of visual pleasure, a pinch of connoisseurship, a mention of myth and a dollop of money.

Considered simply as a piece of exposition, this passage invites comment: for example, is it true that the photographs on view "exude" the qualities Miss Kruger enumerates? What does it mean to describe Picasso, say, as a "star-crossed Houdini"? Or as a "kooky middleman between God and the public"? *Is* this the effect of the photographs in question? Or is talk of star-crossed Houdinis and kooky middlemen merely a way of casting aspersions on some of the most sensitive character portraits of these great artists we possess? I believe it is. And consider the implications of Miss Kruger's chiding observation that all the photographs come from the collection of the Museum of Modern Art; clearly it is meant as a criticism; but why should possession of these photographs be something the Museum of Modern Art is ashamed of? The answer is that for Miss Kruger the artists pictured here form a kind of rogues' gallery of established taste that, precisely because it is established, is suspect.

And the lessons of Miss Kruger's exhibition go far beyond photography. Not only is there the suggestion that the development of modern art has involved a sexist and racist conspiracy—"almost all [the artists on view] are male and almost all are white"—but there is the more basic suggestion that "artistic 'greatness'" itself is a function of social *approval*, of a convergence of societal forces that colludes to elevate certain individuals to the pedestal of artistic success while maliciously passing over other worthy souls. The place of talent, of vision, of personal artistic accomplishment is nowhere included in Miss Kruger's formula for deriving "greatness." Perhaps the habit of seeing every genuine cultural accomplishment in quotation marks—of reducing, that is, cultural achievement to the product of ideological prejudice—dulls one's ability to appreciate or even register true greatness. But the question remains: What does it mean that the Museum of Modern Art should cheerfully support an exhibition based on principles that, if taken seriously, would mean the end of its existence as a guardian of high culture and, yes, of artistic greatness?

This brings us, alas, to Vito Acconci. It has been something of a boom year for the Brooklyn artist. In addition to "Vito Acconci: Public Places," the exhibition of half a dozen large-scale "sculptures" and models currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art, a travelling exhibition of his work

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organized by the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art in La Jolla, California, was on view at the Neuberger Museum of Art at the State University of New York in Purchase this winter. Entitled "Domestic Trappings," that exhibition provided a retrospective overview of Mr. Acconci's activities from 1969, when, at the age of twenty-nine, he started working in (as he put it) "an art context."[3] According to a press release, the exhibition was "the first to critically analyze the predominant themes of architecture, home and domestic relationships found in all periods of this influential artist's work." And this winter also saw an exhibition of Mr. Acconci's early photographic works at the Brooke Alexander Gallery in SoHo.

Now, Mr. Acconci is one of those . . . well, let us agree to call him a *performer,* whom one hesitates even to criticize, for it is clear that attention of any sort only encourages him. Had he merely persisted to inhabit the margins of the art world, one might have gladly ignored him. But in the art world today mere longevity seems to confer a measure of status; and a measure of status, in turn, does much to enhance one's longevity. And it isn't long before even someone of Mr. Acconci's nugatory accomplishments becomes an established figure in the art world, showered with exhibitions at fancy downtown galleries, travelling retrospective exhibitions, and—the crowning victory—a full-scale exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. Anyone who cares about contemporary art cannot help regarding this as a travesty.

In order to have some appreciation of just what we are dealing with in the case of Mr. Acconci, it will be necessary to provide a glimpse of some of what—for lack of an alternative word—I shall call his works. Since the Brooke Alexander gallery has lately featured a handful of his first works made in "an art context," we may as well begin there. These consist of two or more grainy, blown-up photographs that Mr. Acconci took with an instamatic camera, accompanied by a legend written out in what appears to be chalk describing the subject of the photographs. These are rather a come-down from the works of Stieglitz and company in "Picturing 'Greatness,'" though in truth the interest of Mr. Acconci's photographs is not intended to inhere in their aesthetic quality but in their record, or dissection, of simple, everyday activities like walking along a city street, throwing a ball, or touching one's toes. In other words, these photographic collages are specimens of what has come to be called "conceptual art," a locution that experience shows denotes not so much the presence of any definite concepts as the absence of art. Two examples will suffice to give the reader a sense of these works. *Throw* (1969) features two poorly focused, blown-up photographs and a panel with Mr. Acconci's handwritten text listing the title, date, and location of the piece, as well as the "Activity" it was meant to record: "Taking photographs while going through the motions of throwing a ball." Then there is *Blinks* (1969), a slightly more elaborate piece that includes twelve photographs and this explanation: "Walking down city street, holding camera: try not to blink—when I do blink, click camera, snap photo."

The art writer Kate Linker, who contributed an admiring testimonial to the brief catalogue that accompanied the exhibition at Brooke Alexander, describes the photographs as "bold, striking, and of pivotal importance." "[I]n a radical contemporary

3 It may interest readers to know that before Mr. Acconci began working in "an art context" he considered himself a poet. "My involvement with poetry," he recalls, "was with movement on a page, the page as a field for action. My aim was to find a language that went with the page rather than against it: use language to cover a space rather than to uncover a meaning." A glance at his "poems" will show that he needn't have worried about uncovering anything as retrograde as meaning. Completely typical is "Untitled Poem" (1968): "Now I will tell you the truth/I'm nodding my head./Now I will tell you something that can't be questioned./I am waving my hands./Now I will tell you the facts./I'm moving my leg."

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manner," she assures us, "Acconci stages a crisis in the modernist belief in essences, or things-in-themselves." And to think that it took Kant the whole of *The Critique of Pure Reason* to precipitate such a crisis! How easy Mr. Acconci—at least with the help of Miss Linker's rationale—makes it seem. But who can blame him? Reflecting on these early works, Mr. Acconci opines in the catalogue that "there probably should have been more of them." And one can appreciate why: at last count, *Blinks* was being offered for sale for $18,000.

Yet despite the vapidness of these photographic works, one has reason to regret that Mr. Acconci soon abandoned them for quite different sorts of self-expression. In the catalogue accompanying "Domestic Trappings," Ronald J. Onorato, a long-time apologist for Mr. Acconci and a senior curator at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, explains that

> by 1970 Acconci withdrew from the space around himself and focused on the physical reality of his body instead. Here . . . in a work like *Passes,* 1971, where he orchestrated his movements and gestures covering parts of his image for the video camera or *Rubbing Piece,* 1970, where he used one hand to rub away the skin of the other arm, he found a rationale for his activities that describe a kind of dual persona: "Reasons to move: split myself in two (one part can act in relation to the tendencies of the other)." He continued to establish this interior dialogue throughout the early 1970s, . . . as with the gagging mechanism in *Hand and Mouth,* 1970. For *Filler,* 1971, he inserted his head into a box, trying to fill it with his cough, another way of engaging a personalized space. He extended these reflections on one or another of his "selves," conceptualizing his body as a container for, or merging with, animals, . . . or literally carrying on a conversation with himself and one of his others—his penis (*Trappings,* 1971).

And lest one think these "works" were merely temporary aberrations for Mr. Acconci, consider his own explanation of a "video piece" called *Trademarks* (1970): "Biting myself, biting as much of my body as I can reach. Applying printers' ink to the bites; stamping bite-prints on various surfaces. Finding myself, getting to a region, the attempt is to reach, mark as much of my body as possible." Or consider this excerpt from his remarks on *Conversions I* (1970-71): "The screen is dark; . . . I'm seen from the waist up. As I bring the candle in to my breast, the camera zooms in: the camera remains still as I use the candle to burn the hair off each breast and then, once my chest is hairless, as I pull each breast in a futile attempt to develop a woman's breast." And then of course there is Mr. Acconci's single most notorious piece, *Seedbed,* performed at the Sonnabend Gallery in 1972, in which the Artist secreted himself underneath a ramp at the gallery for eight hours or so at a stretch while continuously masturbating and broadcasting his fantasies to the gallery patrons who wandered over the floorboards above him.

Miss Linker and other fans of Mr. Acconci's work are quite right that it raises deep questions; but they aren't questions that have anything to do with the problem of "essences," "things-in-themselves," or any other such weighty matters. Indeed, the main question it raises is why activities that only a few years ago would have been considered pathological—and often illegal, one suspects—should now be trumpeted as interesting vanguard art. Mr. Acconci's activities in an "art context" may strain credibility, but they are no more incredible than the critical reception they have received. Here is Mr. Onorato again:

> With *Broad Jump 71* and *Score* . . . [Acconci] set in motion competitions involving the two women with whom he was living at the time. In *Broad Jump 71,* he competed against the audience, and took the term both in its lexical and jingle senses as the contest became in Acconci's own terms: "jump for a broad," "jump into a broad." The clichéd, genre-determined conventions of male ownership of women as a commodity were at work here as in *Score* where the competition was much more

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> basic, as Acconci kept a kind of subjective evaluation on a daily basis between his two cohabitants . . . . While these seem dated by their stereotypic use of gender roles, his linking of personal relationships with physical or mental competitions relied then on sets of rules, sometimes amateurishly defined, that worked powerfully as analogs for the kind of very personal choices we all [!] make in such intimate relationships.

One is disappointed, though, that Mr. Onorato wasn't more clever in his interpretation of these appalling "works"; for to consider them "dated by their stereotypic use of gender roles" is to betray a lamentable lack of imagination and generosity. Miss Shearer does not fall into this trap in her interpretation of *Broad Jump 71,* which in her view "outrageously caricatures the game of male prerogative. The two women, as mere silent images, are put at the mercy of a set of rules permitting a man to live out his fantasies at their expense. Acconci mimics, and so exposes, how a phallocentric society represents women—as passive."

By now, Mr. Acconci has left such "performance pieces" (what Miss Shearer is pleased to call his "classic performance works") far behind in favor of making large-scale "environmental" pieces, most of which resemble nothing so much as tacky playground equipment or fun-house furniture. The four full-scale pieces on view at the Museum of Modern Art—*House of Cars* (1983), *Bad Dream House* (1984), *Face of the Earth* (1984), and *Landing* (1986-87)—belong in this category. Describing his shift from "performance art" to "sculpture" (as his current pieces are sometimes referred to), Mr. Acconci has spoken of a turn from "a kind of psychological self to a sociological self" —a turn that one can hardly begrudge him, since one imagines that *Seedbed* would be pretty hard on a fellow after a while. As current critical fashion demands, Miss Shearer provides a more *recherché* explanation in her catalogue essay: "Since 1974, Acconci has absented his physical person from his work, evidence perhaps of an increasing concern with the viewer, as opposed to the artist. This shift in his work accords with Barthes's well-known essay 'The Death of the Author' (1968) which asserts the creative primacy of the reader over the author." I wonder how many viewers would welcome "increasing concern" from Mr. Acconci? And how many believe that the change in his work has anything at all to do with the theories of the French critic Roland Barthes?

In any case, it might be mentioned that Mr. Acconci's turn "to a sociological self" has resulted in creations that deliberately recall objects found in parks or playgrounds: greatly oversized athletic equipment—a baseball catcher's mask, for example, or football helmet—that is large enough for viewers to crawl in and on. Elaborating on the critical function of these pieces, Miss Shearer tells us that "at normal size, these objects function protectively; blown up they resemble cages and prisons. Indeed, to some, high-conflict sports like hockey and football already seem repressive and militaristic. Nevertheless, their status, their cultural role as adolescent initiation rites, makes criticizing the value placed on these all-American activities tantamount to criticizing our culture itself. This is what Acconci has done." Tocqueville never had it so easy.

Though she admits that his "message is not and never has been straightforward or easily definable," Miss Shearer insists that Mr. Acconci is "among our most astute social critics." As an example of his astute critical gifts, consider *Instant House* (1980), which consists of a swing connected by ropes and pulleys to four rectangular panels lying flat on the floor; some of the panels have holes cut into them and each is emblazoned with an American flag; when one sits in the swing, the panels are pulled up to surround one like the four walls of a house and—lo!—the back of the panels is revealed to be emblazoned with the Soviet flag. "Seduced by a seemingly innocent piece of playground equipment," Miss Shearer explains, "participants become, on one hand, stooges in the home they have essentially

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built, unaware of their complicity in spreading propaganda. On the other hand, Acconci renders the national symbols of the USSR and USA interchangeable, neutralizing the symbolic language of political institutions." This is what passes for curatorial guidance at the Museum of Modern Art today.

Yet one can hardly blame Miss Shearer. This sort of thing is just what the art world rewards now; no doubt it was for similarly penetrating observations that Miss Shearer was recently brought to the Museum of Modern Art from her previous post as executive director of the "alternative" art gallery Artists Space. And one must also allow that Mr. Acconci's activities are custom-made to elicit such drivel. Oh, the claims made for his work are large. Roberta Smith, for example, assures us in her review of the "Domestic Trappings" exhibition for *The New York Times* that "the questions he raises are significant and influential." (Significant of what? Influential on whom?) Especially extraordinary are the claims made for the social implications of his work. At the conclusion of his essay, Mr. Onorato writes that "through these domestic things and actions and places, Acconci is very much inside the actuality of daily life, producing an art that democratically reveals to us universal aspects of our culture." And according to Miss Shearer, "Acconci is no cynic and is possessed of a genuine, even idealistic, urge toward community."

But the hard truth is that intellectually and artistically Vito Acconci is a pathetic nonentity; if there were such a thing as a Geiger counter to register the presence of artistic achievement, it would be utterly silent when confronted with his "oeuvre." This in fact is why he and his champions have struggled so hard to maintain his image as a formidable artistic rebel. "His art," Miss Shearer declaims at the end of her catalogue essay, "is as extreme and subversive as it has always been." In default of any discernible artistic accomplishment, the aura of extremity is all he has. He is still capable of radical rhetoric: the suburbs, he declares, are "a way of getting people out of the cities, because once people are in the cities, the revolution might happen." And he obviously has accommodating critics like Mr. Onorato and Miss Shearer who are only too happy to certify his importance by insisting on his avant-garde status. But I'm afraid that it's a losing battle: everyone knows that Mr. Acconci's recent works are as insipid and unengaging as his early performance pieces were outrageous.

In a deeper sense, though, the particulars of Mr. Acconci's concoctions are beside the point. What matters is that the Museum of Modern Art has chosen to devote a full-scale exhibition to someone whose work has never displayed an iota of aesthetic intelligence—indeed, whose work has consistently been directed against the very desirability of aesthetic intelligence. The presence of any one of the three shows discussed here at the Museum of Modern Art would be grounds for grave concern about its curatorial direction; the presence of all three at once is grounds for despair. Political humbug, feminist humbug, pathological and adolescent humbug: it comes in all flavors, but is humbug just the same. And lest there be any confusion about the meaning of the word, let me refer the reader to *The American Heritage Dictionary,* where he will find the following under the entry "humbug, *n.*":

> 1. Something intended to deceive; a hoax; imposture. 2. One who tries to trick or deceive others; an imposter; charlatan. 3. Nonsense, rubbish.

Regrettably, that just about sums it up.

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Poems *by Leslie Norris, David Sofield, Henri Coulette, Charles Edward Eaton & John Edward Sorrell*

A sea in the desert

1.
A little sea
in the night
ran its inch of tide
about the bole of the peach tree,
hesitated,
came fawning to my door,
cringed,
fell away.

Its small crests,
its ebb,
broke my sleep.

2.
A little sea
was running in the desert.
It came in
under the edges of the breeze,
a true sea,
sharpening the air with salt.
filling hourly through the night.

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It remembered white ships,
clippers out of China
freighted with tea and roses,
sea-swans
holding gales in their wings,
storms off the coast of fragrant Spain, snarling.

It hurled
against my walls
its gathering whips and drums,
dropped away,
its throat rattling with pebbles.

3.
I got up,
opened my door
to this unbelievable sea.

My yard was lit by silent moonlight.
Parched grasshoppers chirrupped in the ditches.

4.
But still the sea broke
on the beaches of my ears.

My skull was a shell
holding the noisy tides
pouring unseen over the desert.

5.
A man is moon to his own sea—
he draws it after him,
like a dog it follows him
the days of his life.

All that night I heard the sea make
and ebb, a sea formed
of grains of remembered oceans,
fed by rains and rivers

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of days I have finished with.
It carried old sticks in its mouth.
In the morning a tide's detritus,
twigs, small round stones, a can,

lay in uneven lines
on the charred grass.

6.
A hermit thrush sings for me
in dry arroyos its liquid note.
I have heard in the desert
unrecognised birds, charmers,

lift up their single whistles,
long separated, distant,
purified by distance, among
the grassless dunes.

I have thought them calling me.
I have heard the voices
of an invisible sea
whispering with boys'

voices, heard in its dry waves
the pattering of boys' feet
through the built canyons
of the past. I have heard

such singing. The mocking-bird
has sung for me. Each day
the waters of that sea
are rising blindly to the full.

—Leslie Norris

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Insomnia

(Paris, 1987)

More often, now, of course. The different dark,
an amber urban light thickened by snow.
The air's too cold for talk, and so an hour
of drifting thought, uneasy, humorless.
Mechanically, one does in time begin
to hear what's there: someone coughs twice, a dog
replies, over the numbing two-tone cry,
on and on, of the French police. And then,
a pause. By four the quarter seems at rest.

And yet, out of the quiet comes a last
low sound, the ordinary, tired whine,
sporadically, of cars along the quay.
Next door, a door is shut, and in the vague
hollow of semi-sleep one hears again
the traffic as in soft anabasis
it empties out the boulevard, the square,
draining the night, until one knows, below
the night, a dark within the absent dark.

—David Sofield

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The sun rising

Indifferent, as if at last
at rest, knowing that nothing to
be seen will seem remarkable
today, as if the final words
of sight might now at dawn remain
unvoiced, the sun, a fading weight
of memory, would hesitate—
lightly a sea's gray dreaming plane
touching the balanced undercurve—
before submitting to the chill
routine of day, a lassitude
of numbly watching what will pass . . .

until, to one who hears how still
the still uncertain morning is,
it seems again to move, alone,
as if to write, as if it were
the open and familiar form
of day, as if enjambment were
what motion wants—only to turn
dully away, eroded, worn,
an odd, yellowing sphere return-
ing to its rudimentary stone,
wordless monologist of loss,
of nullity, of winterkill.

—*David Sofield*

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On a theme of X

God lurks in the detail.

Violin and cello subside. The masked musicians,
Still in the throes,
Assume a dark repose—
As if they listened to an echo
Waking, among their loftiest intuitions,
Rooftree, rafter, and stucco.

The quiet is the quiet one imagines
Color achieves
Rioting among leaves.
It lingers just a shade too long,
Till bravos come and small talk wells from regions
Where things are comfortably wrong.

Where are we going after this is over?
It's a hard life
With or without a wife.
That goes, my darling, without saying.
What shall I say? A friend, perhaps? A lover?
Well, how much are you paying?

Enough, enough. The wakeful nightingales
Of Heraclitus
Note by note invite us
Out of our brief and shadowy selves.
That is the work of art, and it prevails,
If only on dusty shelves.

—Henri Coulette

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Belvedere

It is not Apollo that you really wish to see in the belvedere,
But your own sleek, sloughed-off, most enigmatic self,
As if the old lifeline enjambed, and in the basic nude you
were standing there.

Yes, there is another sentence, and, so you think, it speaks
the truth—
Those gleaming muscles, tendons, propelled by inner drive,
Select from their allotment this shining figure of a youth.

Up high, up there, because the secret mind adores high art—
You look down on the dump and all the rubber tires,
Call in the truck for just one more, and tell it to depart.

It is a funny thing, this taking something that belongs in Rome,
And on this balcony reenacting something like its pose
Just because you believe it never really found a final home.

The engram must have stuck, a picture in your high school days,
And in this handsome, hidden enclave on a hill,
You can unwrap the figure for its final phase.

The view is still there—alas, the smouldering and the rubber
tires—
What would we do if all the pictures, statues, of the world
Could not travel even for a day as far as our desires?

—Charles Edward Eaton

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Summer beyond the garden

Up from the wild rose bush,
A mad shadow in the sun
Beating harder than our hearts—
The mothering thrush hovers,
Chits, chits and croaks out, hoarse,
Darts and darts down to fend off
From her nest deep in there,
Buried dark and fierce,

Us—stumbling back in our first shock
That a mother, and so small, would pierce
The quiet of our holding hands
And bending down to smell the blossoms,
Nothing more. Catching the sun, the shadow comes
At us, at us, helpless.

—John Edward Sorrell

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Art

"Helga" and other problems

by William C. Agee

At its beginning, this past exhibition season held out great promise for anyone interested in American art. With separate shows planned for Charles Demuth, Georgia O'Keeffe, Charles Sheeler, and John Marin, the prospects were especially good for a serious treatment of early American modernism—a period that is only now beginning to receive the kind of scholarly attention it deserves. Yet at least two of these shows turned out to have serious, and disturbing, flaws. What is more, the horrifying spectacle of the Wyeth affair—in which prestigious American institutions lent their space, and their reputations, to showing the famous "Helga" pictures—cast an ominous shadow over everything to do with American art. One ended the season less with a sense of exhilaration than with a sense of doubt about the state of our museums and the direction they are taking.

Since there is much to criticize, we should first turn our attention to shows of real merit. "Marin in Oil," organized by Klaus Kertess for the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton,[1] was a model of its kind, and vividly demonstrated the heights Marin could reach in the oil medium. We had long suspected that Marin was an even better painter in oil than in watercolor, and this show went a long way toward proving it. The late oils were a special revelation; in work after work one understood convincingly just why Clement Greenberg could say in 1946 that "if it is not beyond doubt that Marin is the greatest living American painter, he certainly has to be taken into consideration when we ask who is."

Ironically, it was Charles Sheeler, the least interesting and the least important of the four American modernists on display this season, who was given the most thorough and lavish treatment. The two-part show, composed of "Charles Sheeler: The Paintings and Drawings" and "Charles Sheeler: The Photographs,"[2] was organized by Carol

1 "Marin in Oil" was on display at the Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, New York from July 18 to September 20, 1987. From there it travelled to the Norton Gallery and School of Art in West Palm Beach, Florida (October 11-November 29, 1987), and the Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences in Savannah, Georgia (January 20-March 7, 1988); it is currently at the Museum of Art at Pennsylvania State University through May 18, and will be on view at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York from July 16 to September 4.

2 "Charles Sheeler: The Paintings and Drawings," organized by Carol Troyen and Erica E. Hirshler, and "Charles Sheeler: The Photographs," organized by Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., and Norman Keyes, Jr., was on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston from October 13, 1987 through January 3, 1988. It is currently on display at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York through April 17; from there it travels to the Dallas Museum of Art (May 15-July 10). The two-volume catalogue, written by the organizers, is available at the Whitney as a paperback set for $49.95.

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Troyen and Theodore Stebbins for the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. It was well selected and beautifully installed; and the two-volume catalogue is a major contribution to the field. Despite the unavoidable absence of a few key works, most notably the famous 1931 *Classic Landscape* now travelling with the Ebsworth Collection, the exhibition was complete, with a special and particularly beautiful section devoted to Sheeler's photographs. At Boston, the photographs were hung separately so that we could study them carefully as individual works, but we could not see them in close relation to the paintings.

Several conclusions were suggested by the show, some of them confirming what we already knew. By now it is not a novel or radical opinion to state that Sheeler was a more gifted photographer than painter, particularly after 1922. Further, there is no escaping the decline of Sheeler's painting after 1931, at precisely the moment his dealer, Edith Halpert, induced him to suppress his photography, thereby suppressing the largest and most authentic portion of his talent. Photography had been the source of his paintings since 1917, and when he was cut off from the medium he was cut off from the animating impulse of his art. When he was at his best—that is, up to 1931—he was consistently better than one might have expected; thereafter his accomplishment was, accordingly, consistently worse. His post-1945 paintings are in the main tight and mechanical, turning late Cubism into something forced and unfeeling. How different this is from the late Cubism of Hans Hofmann, Stuart Davis, and David Smith, in whose hands it became a living vocabulary, accounting in large measure for the glorious flowering of their art after World War II.

The great surprise in the show was the deftness of Sheeler's feathery, painterly touch in certain landscapes of 1915 and 1916. They are remarkably accomplished pictures, even if they show an obvious debt to the landscapes done from 1913 to 1915 by Sheeler's close friend Morton L. Schamberg (1881-1918). One can only wonder what would have been the course of Sheeler's art had he followed this path. It must be said, though, that as good as Sheeler is, he is no match for Schamberg, whose art demands that we accord him his place as a major artist. In any case, we can be grateful for this show, and for its catalogue, which gives us a thorough account of Sheeler that helps us to assess the major issues of his art and life. Unfortunately, the authors do not really confront the differences between his paintings and photographs, and by insisting on the continuity of the two media, Mr. Stebbins merely avoids the question.

Wyeth-bashing is now as tiresome as the art itself. But the debacle known as "Andrew Wyeth: The Helga Pictures" will not go away.[3] After its opening at the National Gallery of Art, it reappeared in Boston (it will travel to six museums). What a pall it casts over that venerable institution! It undermines the honest and diligent efforts of the Sheeler team, to say nothing of the museum's glorious collection, which has been brilliantly reinstalled this year. (To have seen Sheeler in the context of the museum's twenty-three Copleys, for example, was especially instructive.) It is beyond belief that Boston's great nineteenth-century French paintings were removed from their permanent galleries for this, or that the National Gallery in Washington declined to take a great Delacroix show from Zurich—reportedly because certain large paintings from the Louvre could not travel—but could organize this disaster.

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3 "Andrew Wyeth: The Helga Pictures" has been shown at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. It will be on view at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from April 28 to July 10. From there it travels to the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco (August 13 to October 16) and the Detroit Institute of Arts (November 13 to January 22, 1989). An accompanying book, *Andrew Wyeth: The Helga Pictures,* by John Wilmerding, was published last year by Abrams (208 pages, $40).

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When will our museums learn that their ceaseless pursuit of the box office at any cost is hopelessly shortsighted? It only subverts their efforts to make the museum something special; and the idea of teaching the distinctions between good, better, and best, the very basis of their existence, is impossibly compromised. It is unbearable to look at Wyeth after seeing the museum's superb show of Dutch landscape drawings concurrently on display. (With drawings from Rembrandt to Mondrian, it was selected entirely from the Boston collection.) Nor does Wyeth help our viewing of Sheeler. To come to grips with this artist is difficult enough without the monstrous Wyeth circus distorting our perceptions and judgments.

Museums know about this ludicrous disparity, too, for the worse Wyeth's art gets, the more extravagant are the claims made for it. When the Helga pictures are billed as a "national treasure," one can only shake one's head sadly. They are nothing of the sort, and it is an insult to our intelligence to pretend they are. (On Wall Street, the preferred scam is known as "pump and dump"; pump it with hot air and hype and dump it on the unwary client.) This is not a matter of taste, as many will say. It is certifiably true, if one but looks.

Everything is warped, off the mark here. Even the title, "The Helga Pictures," is misleading, since two-thirds of the works are pencil sketches. As always, Wyeth's miraculous "craftsmanship" is extolled, but many a conservator will quickly tell you his pictures are notorious for their poor construction. And the essence of his badness is precisely the total lack of craftsmanship in a given medium. In the temperas, all textures are rendered exactly the same, whether living or inorganic. Color is nonexistent, and the surfaces of the watercolors are often blotted mud. The pencil sketches are frequently little better than an advanced art student's, and certainly far worse than those of a hundred lesser known realist artists working today. Despite the claims made for it, this art has nothing authentic about it, nothing true to experience. Worse yet, the catalogue claims no less a lineage for Wyeth than Dürer, Botticelli, Rembrandt, Manet, Homer, and Eakins. It is truly amazing to see Dürer and Botticelli reduced to the status of "precedents" for Wyeth.

The publicity surrounding the show—the claims that the Helga pictures were a secret, the hints of an affair between artist and model (all false), the colossal sums of money spent to buy the collection, the publishing ventures connected with it—had the trappings of a made-for-television movie. (We might call it *Museum,* and bill it as a sequel to *Airport* and *Hotel,* for it has all the requisite ingredients of power, greed, intrigue, sex, ambition, and money.) Even after we finally exit this endless, suffocating show, it is not over, for we are confronted by a larger-than-life color photomural of Wyeth himself, looming in front of us like an Old Testament prophet. Then, the last touch—we should have seen it coming—an instructional and inspirational videotape narrated by no less a personage than the renowned art expert Charlton Heston! We now understand that this is no longer *Museum.* It is *The Greatest Story Ever Told.*

This enterprise is not worthy of any of our museums, but especially not of the National Gallery. It has become a great institution in the last fifteen years, and has won our respect for many extraordinary exhibitions, the Matisse show being the most recent. But if it does not set consistent standards, what can we expect from hundreds of smaller museums? Who will stand up to this sort of thing? Philippe de Montebello and the curators at the Met did, pointedly turning the show down. *The New York Times* objected on its editorial page, taking the Met to task for not giving the people what they want. The purveyors of such popular sentiments fail to realize that if our museums are going to be educational institutions they must expand our horizons, not narrow them, by taking us into new and unfamiliar realms. No one can object to popular shows, but they must have some claim to artistic merit. Indeed, why not the best? Surely by now it is clear that people will come to look at good art, as the Van

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Gogh, Klee, Matisse, and Zurbarán shows demonstrated. The Museum of Modern Art defended this standard recently by mounting the great Morris Louis exhibition in the face of the predictable disdain of the press and the public. Yet the clarity and beauty of these works—as well as the brilliant writing of John Elderfield in the catalogue—placed this show squarely in the long tradition of canonical shows MOMA has organized over the last fifty years.

The huge lines at the National Gallery for the Georgia O'Keeffe exhibition convincingly demonstrated, if it was ever in doubt, the power of her mystique. Museums have been vying for position to do the first O'Keeffe show since her death in 1986, just short of her hundredth birthday. Because the veneration accorded to her has overshadowed her art, we have badly needed a carefully selected retrospective in order to gauge the exact nature and extent of her achievement. Sad to say, this show falls far short of those expectations. It has the feel of having been organized too quickly, with little sense of real purpose other than to do the first posthumous show and rush it into production in 1987, her centennial year. An exhibition of this importance demands long and arduous preparation, with a specialist guiding and overseeing it all. American art now abounds in specialists, some of whom are first-rate. It is a pity (for example) that a way could not be found for the National Gallery to work with Charles Eldredge, director of the National Museum of American Art in Washington, who is a leading scholar in the field and an O'Keeffe specialist. (His lecture on O'Keeffe at the St. Louis Art Museum, on the occasion of the opening of the Ebsworth Collection last November, was the single best thing I have read or heard on the artist.)

In his foreword to the catalogue, J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery, is on the mark when he calls the show a "celebration," because the selection is far too haphazard to be called a true retrospective.[4] Jack Cowart and Juan Hamilton, who organized the show, both deny that it is a retrospective. But since works from the "1910s through the 1940s are included with several special themes from the 1950s and 1960s," as Mr. Cowart acknowledges, what else could it be called but a retrospective? From the start, we are likely to be confused as to what exactly the show sets out to achieve.

The foreword also asserts that Mr. Cowart "traveled the country in search of O'Keeffe's best art." One cannot doubt this, but one can question the success of the search, for too many important pictures are missing to give the show the authority it needs. O'Keeffe isn't given a fair chance. Her art is problematic, to say the least, and in the main her almost mythic status far outweighs her actual artistic achievement. Yet she contributed something important to our culture, and her best art—that is, the work she produced from 1916 through 1930—demands serious consideration. If her work is not brought together carefully it makes an already difficult task of assessment even harder. Any serious artist deserves at least this, a show in which we can place our confidence.

Such is the reverence extended to O'Keeffe that the crowds never seemed to diminish, whatever the shortcomings of the show. Indeed, it is safe to say that almost *any* selection would have attracted them, and the organizers apparently banked on this when making their choices. The result? Hundreds of thousands of people, no matter what their feelings about O'Keeffe, will go away with a fragmented and incomplete view of her art.

What a shame that they will not see, for example, the great abstraction of c. 1919

4 "Georgia O'Keeffe: 1887-1986" was on view at the National Gallery of Art through February 21 and is currently at the Art Institute of Chicago until June 19. From there it will travel to the Dallas Museum of Art (July 31 to October 16) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (November 19 to February 5, 1989). The catalogue, by Jack Cowart, Juan Hamilton, and Sarah Greenough, is entitled *Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters* (National Gallery of Art, 306 pages, $22).

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now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the best of her color pictures of the time. Where is the dramatic skull picture from the Met, surely one of the best of this series? Or the second of the two great abstractions of the Twenties from the Whitney? Where are the barn paintings of 1928-1932? Two of her most important pictures are travelling with the Ebsworth Collection, but far too many other works, for whatever reason, are not here. Her watercolors of 1916-1918 may well be her deepest, most consistent achievement, but there are still too few of them here to allow us to absorb their full impact. On and on it goes, and it is not only the omissions that hurt. There is a high proportion of estate pictures in the show; these would ordinarily be welcome, but many appear to have been randomly selected, since few are major. A more thorough inventory would surely have uncovered pictures of more importance and accomplishment. In addition, the small still lifes of 1920 and 1921 are less than minor and do nothing but demonstrate just how little feel for oil paint she had, a predicament that only grew more acute with time.

In her watercolors, O'Keeffe's color was often strong and sure, but in the *Series I* abstractions of 1918-1919 the color is acid, strident, off-key, and the paintings are not successes. These are not well-known paintings, at least to this writer. If they had been hung chronologically with the watercolors of the same time we might have learned why she often failed when working with strong color in oil. The watercolors are consistently better, it seems, because she had to trust more to the medium, to let the medium and not the image dictate the character of the picture. We needed a chronological hanging to see her art properly, but the show is arranged, as her 1970 retrospective was, by theme. O'Keeffe apparently insisted on this method, but it hurts her art, for when the same type of pictures are strung out in succession their differences, their unique traits, begin to blur. Certainly it appears that the success of her later oil paintings, such as the Ebsworth *Black, White and Blue* of 1930 or the 1927 *Black Abstraction* from the Met, is due in great part to the restriction of her palette to deep, dark hues. This may also be because the dark end of the spectrum is more innately suited to the melodramatic spectacles of nature that she came to concentrate on after discovering New Mexico in 1929.

As O'Keeffe spent more and more time in New Mexico after 1931, her pictures became drier, like the soil itself. It is from this time that we begin to see the decline of her art. Much of the decline can be traced to the nature of the place. The archeological severity, the romance of the region, its topography and artifacts—all seemed to dry out her palette, as well as her painterly touch and imagination. Stuart Davis and Marsden Hartley instinctively understood this inherent danger and fled, never to return, after spending a brief period there. As time went on, it was the images themselves, bones, barns, mountains, flowers, that O'Keeffe relied on to ingratiate her art with the viewer. She never really worked to master the craft of painting, to overcome her lack of the necessary technical equipment. Technical mastery did not come naturally to her, as George L. K. Morris, a still underappreciated painter, astutely noted in *Partisan Review* as far back as 1938.

There are a few wonderful exceptions to this general decline, such as the powerful 1938 *Red Hill and White Shell.* There are also surprises to be found earlier on, as in the compelling *Radiator Building—Night, New York* of 1927, which now strikes one as possibly a symbolic portrait of Alfred Stieglitz, with its looming presence and Stieglitz's name in lights at the left center. The painting also looks forward to the skyscraper images of Stuart Davis, such as *New York Mural* of 1932; and the staccato rhythms of the illuminated windows in their insistent grid predicts Mondrian's New York pictures of 1943-1944.

These successes are all too rare in this exhibition, however, and unfortunately we shall have to wait for another occasion for a more rigorous and comprehensive show.

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The two brief essays by Mr. Cowart and Juan Hamilton, O'Keeffe's assistant and confidant, do not help. They are little more than appreciations of the artist, leaving us with lines like, "Her art is memorable." The catalogue's suggestion that she is in the same league as Van Gogh and Gauguin is inappropriate. By far, the most important part of the whole endeavor is the publication of O'Keeffe's letters, which appear here for the first time. They were gathered and edited by Sarah Greenough, who also wrote concise and informative notes to accompany them. They are fascinating, and help us, as Miss Greenough states, to separate O'Keeffe's art from her biography. One only wishes the same seriousness of purpose informed the rest of the exhibition and catalogue.

The Wyeth and O'Keeffe shows call into doubt the depth and direction of the twentieth-century program at the National Gallery. Right now its fate hangs in the balance. The momentum gained in this still young department by the quality of the Braque, Mondrian, Kandinsky, and David Smith shows organized by E. A. Carmean (now director at the Forth Worth Art Museum) in the late Seventies and early Eighties is rapidly diminishing. The department appears to be ambitious only in its hunt for collections, and not in any seriousness of conception and purpose.

These are harsh judgments, to be sure. But for many years, American art was hardly recognized, deemed unworthy of serious study. We have gone past that by now, but if twentieth-century American art and its art scholarship are to take their place in the broad spectrum of art history, the same demanding standards as those which have informed older and modern European art must apply. Otherwise, we are back in the soup, caught between *Mrs. Freake and Baby Mary* and the Armory Show, with only a few crumbs of pre-1945 American art to be found in the traditional histories of the modern period. If American art itself is to be judged by the standards of world art, it must be subject to "quality control," as John I. H. Baur termed it shortly before his death last year. Otherwise, we judge it by other and therefore lesser standards, unworthy of our best art.

American modernism badly needs a new, critical reassessment of its artists (and of its art literature). Marin is one of our greatest artists, clearly, as are Schamberg, Hartley, and Stuart Davis. Sheeler and O'Keeffe are lesser, in the second rank by American standards (and lower than that by world standards), but they are serious. Wyeth is none of these things; he registers only at the box office. In the second part of this article, I will write in detail of Charles Demuth, the subject of a retrospective organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art and the artist whose achievement, of all our modernists, has been the most difficult to define. Whether the Whitney is up to the task is a question I intend to address.

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Just a glimpse at Giovanni Pisano

by Creighton Gilbert

The list of the very greatest sculptors in the history of Western culture is much shorter than that of painters or musicians or almost any comparable group. There are presumably Phidias and Polycleitos, and certainly Donatello and Michelangelo; there are probably Bernini and Rodin, and shall we say Brancusi? The select list also includes Giovanni Pisano, though he is not nearly as well known to a wide public. This is for various commonplace reasons, such as his having worked mostly in small towns where only the serious minority of tourists go, having lived in a culture where there were no writers about art, not having produced multiples as Rodin did, and being most available today in small-scale works. (His monumental ones are in a very poor state of preservation, having been outside in the weather for centuries.) Yet to those who are aware of him there is no hesitation about his quality, and that is true for sculptors as well as historians. The comment that is always quoted, by those trying to attract a larger public to him, is that of Henry Moore, who said Giovanni was one of the ten greatest artists Europe has produced. Moore stimulated the interest of Michael Ayrton, a younger British sculptor, to the extent of getting him to produce a really helpful book about the sculptor. Entitled *Giovanni Pisano* (1970), it is one of the rare monographs on an artist that can be recommended on every level; it is thoroughly informative and practical on such tricky issues as how the artist's small figures relate to the large complexes that include them, and it shows an evocative sympathy. For a number of years it sat in big stacks on the tables of remainder bookstores, but now it is harder to find.

In Italy, Giovanni is of course not such an obscure name. Last year in Genoa an unusual small exhibition was arranged focusing on just one of his many-part works, accompanied by a few others. This central work was the sculptor's last, done there around 1314, when he was between sixty-five and seventy, and the only one which he did for a big city. It was the tomb of an empress, who died while visiting Genoa and was given a properly rich burial by her husband, the Holy Roman Emperor Henry VII. Installed in the choir of a church there, it suffered the usual fate some centuries later of being discarded as an unfashionable primitive. This meant that it was dismantled and the parts disposed of, usually by being sold separately. Many of them seem to be totally lost, and only one central segment was identified in the nineteenth century, when the art of this era was again being recognized (in the work of Giotto and the painters of Siena as well as Giovanni).

But since 1960, when it no longer seemed possible, several more small parts have been spotted by scholars. Two were in use as garden sculpture, one found under an arbor where it had been favored for target practice by local boys. Another head had been long overlooked after being placed on a headless

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decorative sculpture from a different epoch. Still another was owned by that most typical of collectors of great past art, an anonymous Swiss; it had apparently been smuggled out of Italy in a suitcase by an anti-Fascist refugee. After all this, it seemed obvious to art historians that it would be very nice if all those parts could be temporarily brought together to see if a reconstruction of the general layout was possible.

This not unusual idea got unusual support from other people as the result of some coincidences. One is that, for Italians, Henry VII is not just any medieval monarch. His contemporary Dante made a hero of him, and gave him a critical role in *The Divine Comedy*; this was Dante in his role as a political exile and loser, seeking to find someone who would bring peaceful unity to the squabbling towns of Italy. The Holy Roman Empire had some traditional legal claim to being the feudal overlord of them all, and Henry was one of the occasional emperors who tried to enforce the claim by travelling there; it was on that journey that the empress died. The Italian effort at unity was only successful, of course, in the nineteenth-century risorgimento, if not wholly so even then. In the nineteenth century the process of unity included the invocation of national figures of pride like Dante, whom everybody in Italy reads even now. Thus Henry VII has something of the resonance that applies, say, to the English Henry V in his country, the victor of Agincourt who is most familiar by way of Shakespeare.

Still another coincidence helping to bring the exhibition about was the strong Genoese proprietary pride in Christopher Columbus. He is to be commemorated in that city in a big way especially in 1992, of course, but in preceding years as well. So it seemed just right to do this exhibition, and also to send it to America, carrying the support of no less than three departments of the Italian national cabinet (Foreign Affairs as well as Arts and Tourism) and the honorary patronage of the president. The exhibition also became a part of a lavish New York Italian Festival, which included splendid productions by major repertory companies of plays and operas, conferences, films, and exhibitions at the Guggenheim, Brooklyn, and Jewish Museums, the New York Public Library, and other places. And so this work, comparable say to Bernini's Saint Theresa, came to the Metropolitan Museum.

What happened to it there was such an anticlimactic reversal that it was almost absurd. Anyone who complains that the Metropolitan turns its international events into blockbusters cannot have taken note. (To be sure, some of those who scold are the very persons who will only notice if a block is busted.) For this exhibition, there was no banner over the entrance (at the time, the main banner announced nineteenth-century American landscapists such as Asher B. Durand), and there was no walkie-talkie guide by the director or anyone else to be rented. More extremely, there was no listing of the exhibition in the museum's calendar of events of November, the time of its unusually brief display (October 30-December 6). So to see it you almost had to have come to the museum for something else; you could then find it by following a modest number of modest signs to the very rear of the building, to the lower level of the Lehman wing. (These signs became a bit hard to use as a route map when the route became a detour, at the time of the installation along the way of the museum's perennially popular enormous Christmas tree.) The calendar's silence seems to reflect the fact that the show had been postponed, after being first announced for an equally brief display in September, with the new date decided on too late. The original date did get reported in *The New York Times*, toward the end of a story about the Italian Festival, followed in the next day's paper by a small correction notice about the new date. That was the only publicity I spotted about the actual schedule.

Then there was no catalogue. At the small sales desk in the Lehman wing, one sample copy was displayed of the catalogue produced for the Genoa show (which had included a few more works). This copy,

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quite properly not itself for sale, was accompanied by a notice that orders for the book would be taken: it was in Italian, in hardcover, and cost fifty dollars. Unknown to the alert salesperson at this desk, however, the big store near the museum entrance had one other copy (apparently no more) in stock; there I was told it was all right to purchase it, so I snapped it up. The staff of the Italian Festival produced just what was called for in the circumstances, a folder in English with an entry on each sculpture, and the curators kindly gave me a copy of this. But during the last week of the show, the Lehman salesperson was very much interested in my copy since none had arrived for public distribution and he hadn't seen it until then. On a Friday when the show was more than half over, the *Times* ran a quite good short review, rightly noticing that the exhibition was "tucked away." It offered the kind of reactive annotations of a formalist kind that are usual in eight-hundred-word pieces on a one-man show of some interest.

The effect of the general de-emphasis in New York seemed visible when, even while calling the artist great, the *Times* piece reported in a standard formulation that he had "never before had an exhibition in the United States." That does sound like the version of this statement regularly used, say, for a prominent current European artist reaching mid-career, as distinguished from the more emphatic version one would get if a really important older artist was involved, with something about his having been unduly neglected until now. How funny it is when applied here can be suggested by simply inserting the name of a more popularly famous equivalent of Giovanni, say Fra Angelico.

Such a tepid critical response, one can also feel, could well breed despair among the good people who brought to fruit this fantastically improbable and difficult enterprise, one which, in a museum context, should rank as of world-class significance. It's as if someone had actually succeeded, in the political arena, in accomplishing something like making Belgian public life harmonious, only to have it be treated placidly

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as one of the items for an evening's newscast. It might be enough to convert one to finding merit in blockbusters.

The truly sad thing about the exhibition, however, was the bad installation. It seems to have been fought over by several parties, and it is the other side that won in each side's account. The most obvious error was with the statue that occupied in isolation the exact center of the octagonal well of space. This allegorical figure of Justice is a wonderful carving, deserving prominence. What was wrong derived from our being asked to look at her full face, as the placing of the statue on its pedestal with its label made us do. The installer was evidently after a strong confrontation between us and this vigorous character, and that would be fine as far as it goes. But it is undeniable that she should have been seen with her head turned to the right, to pay heed to something involving other figures.

The real front view of the statue shows the head halfway toward profile. She was of course one of a set, and the cataloguer's solution—that she was the leftmost in a row of four—is quite reasonable, if not totally certain. One can readily gauge the degree of the neck turn from the cutting of the base, a square plinth on which the figure's feet rest. Its front is a simple straight line parallel to us like a picture plane. This is demonstrated in the catalogue photographs and works fine. Not only does she turn, she simultaneously jerks her head and shoulders backward, evoking, in a way typical of the artist, a stressful balance of bulging weights in the middle of a continuing motion. The figure also typically has heavy modeled horizontal folds of cloth around her waist, in a counteraction. These tubelike forms are almost parallel, starting from the top, but the lower ones drop or sag more and more at the center, again pointing to the interplay between tense elastic initiatives of mobile life and the inertial power of blocky gravitational fall.

The *Times* photographer got this pose almost right; he moved just a little bit to the right from the true view in the direction of the installed one, perhaps to get more of the face; the head in his view doesn't jerk back sharply but tends to look downward, and the tight features suggest petulance. But the installer ignored everything, showing no respect, or more probably no awareness, of historical details; he simply let his spontaneous, design-ish reaction take over. The notion seems to be that a statue is always a thing to be given its own separate effect without context.

A quite different kind of bad effect involved a group of four statues from another Genoese monument. This is a set of really bad sculpture anyway. That was quite well understood and articulated by the organizer of the show, the German art historian Max Seidel, who is the recognized authority on Giovanni Pisano and whose admirable studies have recovered much more about him than had been available before. In the catalogue, Seidel observed that these statues, when "placed in direct comparison with" Giovanni's, "could by their opacity produce the effect of an esthetic dissonance," as indeed they do. He thus understood not only the difference of quality but the problem of the installation in a show. Why did he then include them in it? He explains quite properly that they can be identified as copies of Giovanni's set of four; thus, they are our best basis for an imaginary reconstruction of what the latter looked like before much of it was lost. They incidentally also document the waves that Giovanni's work set up among the rather low-level craftsmen in the city. The citation of such copies for this purpose is common among art historians, in the form of reproductions in learned articles. Seidel, because of his justified prestige and the ambitiousness of the show, got the rare opportunity to do it with the real works, moving them temporarily adjacent to the surviving part of Giovanni's set. In the Metropolitan installation, this function of their presence was ignored, and the four statues were installed in equal and balanced prominence with his. The dissonance was deafening.

It is quite true that Giovanni Pisano does not make it easy for us to decide about the

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installation of fragments of his work. Like others, I am not in agreement with Seidel's reconstruction of the greatest group in his show, in which two angels help to lift the empress's body out of her tomb so it can rise to heaven. (The show, by the way, downgrades her to queen. It is correct that she died six months before her husband was crowned, but allusions to her at the same date as the work on the tomb called her empress.) As the three figures push through the complex shifting movements, in diagonal webs of touching limbs and body parts with holes between, the soft surfaces of heavy draperies allow for fluid modulation in the lifting and resisting forces, an overlay in counteraction to the keen tension and basic massiveness of the process as a whole; in this it has been rightly said that Giovanni seems to anticipate the Baroque marble sculpture of three hundred years later, as seen in its greatest master Bernini.

Indeed, it is probably a bit provincial to praise Bernini as original in this way while not recalling Giovanni Pisano. Bernini was of course a great original, but to slough off some of the claims for him in favor of Giovanni would only clarify, by narrowing, the later master's actual achievements. Even so, I think Seidel has made this group of three figures even too Berninian. He has put them in a step pattern, the left angel further in front and the right one behind the ascending empress between them. He argues that the previous reconstructions would result in a collision between the empress and the now lost head of the left angel, which is true. But it can also be avoided in an alternate way, if the angel is further away to the side, as a still earlier proposal had indeed put it. For me, placing all three figures in one plane only heightens, in a way typical of Giovanni, the stress between their participation in a constrained rhythm and their infinitely free, river-like movement, evoking too the probable position of the architecture that enclosed them. But such open questions cannot subtract from the extraordinary luck of seeing these works, close up, well lighted, and well cleaned, even if for so short a visit.

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Yes, yes

by Jed Perl

Original. When an artist makes radical innovations in a familiar medium, or combines several familiar media in a radically original way, it takes a while for the rest of us to catch on. Barbara Goodstein's relief sculptures, which are done in plaster and modeling paste on rectangular pieces of plywood, may not startle us, but they're just about the only works to have emerged in this decade that can be said to add something new to sculpture. Since Donatello, all European relief sculpture has been in some respect an extension of painting; Goodstein is the first artist to evolve a relief sculpture style out of an aesthetic derived from painterly painting. Even when her reliefs don't look like painterly paintings, she's deriving her rhythms and inflections from them. In her third solo show at the Bowery Gallery in January there were some very high points and some very low points; there wasn't the across-the-board clarity of thought that the finest pieces in the show might have led you to expect. When an artist begins to raise our expectations, her biggest competition may turn out to be her own work. The Barbara Goodstein who can pull off a work of the caliber of *Resurrection (1)* can't yet sustain that level of accomplishment—still, she's one of the few artists who has a level of accomplishment to fall off from.

There's no way of knowing for sure if the three faceless white figures in Goodstein's *Resurrection (1)* are male or female. Ambiguity is integral to the coolly impassioned mood Goodstein spins. In *Resurrection (1)* all we can be sure of is that three figures are locked in a pitch-black place; a place that—judging from their tensed-up, straining gestures—they would like to leave. Working with the most modest of materials, Goodstein transforms human anatomy into a series of expressionist graphic signs. She simplifies people, but she also brings us close to them—she shows us their experience. Goodstein's subject here is striving; and, perhaps, the something we strive toward. The central figure, with the broad shoulders and the substantial upper arms, is helping the other two. The figure at left is just a few looping lines; the one at right is made of some scrabbles of plaster. These two look toward the stronger one, and the stronger one—a bulky torso on sturdy legs—faces forward and prepares to hoist them all, together, up on high.

The inspiration for *Resurrection (1)* was a fourteenth-century Turkish fresco of the Anastasis (a scene actually preceding the Resurrection) in which Christ raises Adam and Eve from the dead. This late Byzantine composition presented Goodstein with a store of concrete information off which she bounced her own minimalist sensibility. Goodstein has done much of her most forceful work—including the *Pieta* in this show and the series of Three Graces in her last show—in response to models in older art. At forty-two, she's one of the most intelligent of the art-besotted artists of her

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generation; few are quite so alive to the possibility of making something really new out of the pieces of the past. Goodstein is liberated through her attachment to tradition. Models such as the Byzantine Anastasis give her a world that's pre-abstracted. She doesn't have to wonder how to turn an area of sky or floor or earth into a flat shape—it's already done. She's free to pursue her quirky figuration without the constant question, "How does this size up to reality?" The flat black space of *Resurrection (1)* has no relation to "real" space—it's the space of memory, and of art.

Mostly, though, the black-painted rectangles on which Goodstein does her sculptures don't have that metaphoric resonance. In her recent show Goodstein was using relief sculpture as a medium through which to develop thematic and structural ideas we generally encounter in the work of painters. It's an audacious program, difficult to pull off, and in many of the landscapes and single figures in this show the beautiful modeling in plaster ended up looking landlocked. Goodstein's pats of plaster are an analogy to the loose brushstroke of nineteenth- and twentieth-century French painting; the winning eccentricity of her work rests in her attempt to re-create sculpture within a painterly, expressionist sensibility that is, broadly speaking, anti-sculptural. But by going into three dimensions, Goodstein endangers the very essence of French modernism: the idea of the picture surface as a discrete world. When she reduces a landscape of trees to a few strokes of plaster, or puts a seated studio nude in the midst of a black space, the pictorialism of the reliefs begins to backfire—the black space can seem like an afterthought. The white plaster signs don't always activate the rectangle. Two treescapes looked too much like Ab Ex explosions by Franz Kline or the Frenchman Georges Mathieu. Even the very beautiful *Mountain Landscape*, in which a great ribbon of mountain rises maybe two inches off the surface, has its problems: where in real space is one supposed to locate the blank space below the hills?

In her recent show Goodstein wasn't standing still; she was trying different things. But the two most daring pieces were also the weakest ones. How Goodstein cooked up the idea of doing polychrome reliefs on a base of styrofoam packing materials covered in wire mesh and modeling paste I have no idea; in any event, the results are unpleasantly bizarre, like a hardened version of soft sculpture. In *Five Figures in a Landscape* Goodstein is working to activate the surface by filling it with colored shapes. Some of the nude women here, reminiscent of Matisse's sculpture, are magnificent pieces of plaster modeling; but by putting them in a space divided into areas of blue stream and green grass and mustard sky, she banalizes them. In *Four of Iris*, several views of a woman's back, marvelously worked, are arranged amidst fragments of interior space that look like bad geometric painting. More interesting as a solution to the problem of activating the surface overall is the substitution of dark blue or green for black on the boards; or the use of plaster thinned to a gray tone.

Still, I don't know why Goodstein hasn't extended the implications of *Resurrection (1)* into more of her work. She is an extraordinary figure sculptor. Here, as in her last show, she turns out standing and seated figures in which the wonderful simplifications, achieved through a close study of nature, rival Alexander Archipenko and Henri Laurens at their very best. Why, then, does some of the work seem unfulfilled? A larger version of *Resurrection,* three by five feet, was too loose, a bag of scraps. Goodstein hadn't filled the space; it was as if she'd just fizzled. And two small, very fine studio nudes, seated on chairs, would have been better yet if they'd been two or three times bigger. Sometimes Goodstein seems to want to be the Corot of relief sculpture—a miniaturist. It's a mistake. Her real affinity is with French painting that's more idiosyncratic and monumental—the tile decorations in Matisse's Chapel in Vence; the final black and white figure compositions of André Derain; the late street scenes of Jean Hélion.

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Goodstein's work, with its arresting simplifications, suggests a devastating critique of contemporary taste in representational art, which runs to nit-picking demonstrations of naturalistic virtuosity. And yet the only community that has ever given Goodstein any support is the community of representational painters that has been an important part of the New York art scene since the Fifties. Thus does one of the wisest members of the community revolt against communal pieties. Goodstein's art, which has only really taken off since she reached her late thirties, also exemplifies what I see as a new calendar in artistic life. It now seems to take a serious artist most of his or her thirties to develop the inner strength to make peace with the art world and go it alone.

Yet the painful sense of isolation from the larger world that all serious artists now feel has its dangers. Working, as Goodstein does, for a small group of artists and connoisseurs, she may feel that it's enough to maintain a holding operation. How much can you risk doubting yourself when the wide world gives you no support? And how much can an artist risk reaching out—enlarging art—when chances are that few will be there to respond? A certain diffidence could be felt in ways both large and small in Goodstein's show. A small but important matter was the sloppiness of the presentation—the messy wall labels, the inelegant nails that held the work to the wall, the sometimes warped and roughly cut boards. I think I understand Goodstein's diffidence. It's as if she's saying that if the wide world won't care about her, then she can't be bothered with the niceties of presentation that the wide world demands. But Goodstein is too important to overlook these things. Someday the wide world will pay attention. She must be ready.

All art today is created under conditions inhospitable to art. Goodstein's purest works are a response to a situation in extremis; she creates compositions in black and white. In *Resurrection (1)* she speaks not only for herself but also for the hopes of her friends—for a generation of artists that wakes up every morning to the terror that it's going to be buried alive.

Joker. Milan Kunc, a Czech artist now living in New York, works out of the same fund of Soviet kitsch images that are the sources for the Russian exiles Komar and Melamid. He's Komar and Melamid minus the pomposity. Kunc's photocollages, which were at Robert Miller in February, are based on three-by-four-foot photo blowups of cliché images of happy citizens under socialism—women working in kitchens; men standing in fields of wheat or sitting down for a meal. When Kunc paints on the photographs in powdery blues and pinks and yellows, the effect is akin to the hand-painted postcards of the turn of the century, only Kunc's work is wryly purposeful in ways those postcards never were. Kunc takes two photographs of women ironing, and swishes some blue clouds under their feet, and yellow halos around their heads—and makes them into domestic saints. One woman holds up a towel on which Kunc has painted a little Neo-plastic composition. It's Veronica's veil as an art world icon. Kunc swirls around the fantasy of a good life under Communist-bloc socialism, and the little touches he adds to the photographs are enough to keep the comedy light. Looming just beneath the surface of these throwaway compositions is the hard fact that you have to leave the place that the jokes are about in order to make the jokes. A better comedian would have something to say about that. But then Kunc's work does convey the pop joy of freedom. This is the right fluff.

Maestro. Picasso died in 1973; but as a creative force many believed he had died several decades before. His later work, much of which is by any standard weak or simply undistinguished, made him easy to overlook, and at a time when modern art was often seen as an art of young men, Picasso was without much ado retired to the old age home of reputations. The only late modern style that found wide acceptance in the Fifties and Sixties was Matisse's in his paper

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cutouts; and even then, Matisse's work between 1918 and 1940 was held in low esteem—the paper cutouts were an exception to the rule. For a long time modern art was thought to be about aesthetic breakthroughs, not aesthetic consolidations, and so the very concept of a late style—a style of subtleties based on long experience—fell out of favor.

In the early Seventies few people were interested in Picasso's late work: only some of his old friends in France (Michel and Louise Leiris; Hélène Parmelin; André Malraux) and some art historians in America. I believe the upsurge of sympathy for the late Picasso that we've seen in the past ten years—it has now reached a culmination with "Le Dernier Picasso," the big event at the Pompidou Center in Paris this spring—marks a genuine sea change in taste and consciousness. It's not just vain curiosity to want to contemplate the end of a great career; our new interest in Picasso's conclusions, which he was drawing at the century's three-quarter mark, are part of a more general effort to see the trajectory of our century as a whole.

In the exhibit of drawings from the last decade of Picasso's career that was at Hirschl and Adler in February the Maestro keeps his figures—which are the usual round-up of grand ladies, nudes, courtiers, and musketeers—very close to the viewer. The four edges of the paper define a shallow stage. This holds true for the chiaroscuro drawings, where Picasso does his version of Rembrandt-esque lighting, as well as for the drawings in more or less unornamented line. In general I have problems with the shaded drawings. There's something softly seductive, but also a little vague and shoddy, about the way Picasso develops an illusion of depth. The gray washes have too much of Manet's slipperiness for my taste; Picasso is looking for easy effects. The line drawings are another matter, especially those from around 1970. In the pen and ink of *Le Peintre et son Modèle* (May 24, 1970) and the soft pencil of *Homme et Femme Nus* (August 2, 1970), Picasso is rehabilitating the neoclas-

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sical line of the drawings of the Twenties for a new kind of effect. His strokes separate form from form with the same decisiveness they did forty years earlier; but in place of Picasso's old nostalgia for Ingres and Flaxman there's a fresh self-sufficiency in the way a line sets out into the emptiness of a page. Spreading out into a bulbous thigh, or resolving into a tiny pinpoint of a neck, these lines are comic without ever being cartoonish. The thin, scratchy pen lines in the 1970 drawing are like the dry voice of an old man. Eroticism and asceticism meet.

Jeffrey Hoffeld, a member of the staff of Hirschl and Adler, has written an essay for the catalogue that's characteristic of current commentary on Picasso: much is made of Picasso's debts to the Old Masters and Spanish literature, as well as of his waning sexual powers. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" is quoted. All of this is no doubt relevant; and yet I'm mistrustful of the tendency to cloak Picasso in grand allusions, in some sort of Shakespearean tragedy of old age. Is it by accident that André Malraux's magisterial study of the late Picasso, *Picasso's Mask*, isn't in Hoffeld's bibliography? Malraux saw Picasso as an artist who was simply trying to resolve the artistic problems that had obsessed him for half a century. An old man himself, Malraux didn't romanticize old age. Malraux also made a connection between Picasso's final works and the period when they were done—the late Sixties, when the Maestro's rebellious hedonism found many echoes in the youth culture. At Hirschl and Adler, where the dark velvet walls have rarely done much for the work on display, Picasso's drawings labored under the added liability of the kind of over-framing that galleries use to justify very high prices. (Louise Leiris, the first dealer to show the late drawings, frames them in plain wood.) At Hirschl and Adler one saw East Side gallerygoers who fit right in with velvet and period frames. But there were also young art students at the show, and it was their faces that mirrored Picasso's passion. There's a vigor to the very late Picasso—and it's not entirely unlike the vigor of youth.

Visitor. Using different thicknesses and lengths of steel wire, and pieces of pinkish granite, the Japanese artist Tamotsu Shiihara turned the front gallery of 55 Mercer into an arresting, lightly surreal environment in February. Shiihara welds the wire into delicate zig-zags and networks that rest on the floor or project off the wall. Sometimes a little piece of granite perches amidst the steel rods, like a bird's nest in a tree. Running all around the room, from floor to ceiling, Shiihara's traceries suggest a plan for some sort of futuristic universe. But there's also a pleasing literalness to his effects: you're always conscious that he's decorating a room. It's a little like a new version of a Japanese rock garden—a garden of granite and steel. Yet Shiihara doesn't play the update-of-tradition for corny effect. He recalls the best side of Noguchi—the side that makes vivid contemporary theater out of a mix of Western modern and Eastern classical techniques. This is Shiihara's first show in America, and what impresses a viewer is the fun he's having with materials, the wit to make a SoHo gallery into a garden that's halfway between the earth and the moon.

Fantasist. The return to representation that has been an aspect of painting in New York since the Fifties is founded on perception, but also on a study of the traditional systems by which nature has been schematized, turned into art. In the Sixties, at a time when painters both representational and abstract were reacting against what was seen as the excessive subjectivity of Abstract Expressionism, the Italian art of the fifteenth century had a large appeal. Richard Chiriani, who was a student at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn in the mid-Sixties, became caught up in this fascination with the quattrocento. In the five shows he's had (four at Tibor de Nagy, and a fifth at Robert Schoelkopf in January), he's remained true to the taste for crisp form and clearly designed spaces that first seized him all those years ago. Happily, Chiriani never became caught up in the neoclassical nostalgia that all too often came along with an interest in fifteenth-century

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composition. Chiriani is one of the few artists who understand that fifteenth-century perspective is a mathematical artifice, and is in some sense anti-naturalistic. The paintings in his first show at Tibor de Nagy in 1978 were like beautifully thought-through science fiction visions: giant cubic structures rose out of parched landscapes full of trees shaped like crystals. Chiriani was linking up a fantasy of the past and a fantasy of the future. For this artist, and for some of his friends back in Brooklyn in the late Sixties, quattrocento perspective was an intellectual head trip—a discipline you could get stoned on. (Remember Vasari's comment about Uccello's having gone mad on perspective?) Chiriani's early compositions, with their precise yet peculiar forms, were trippy paintings; they could have been dreamed up by a pothead who was reading the *Dune* books—those sci-fi works that are the literary equivalent of turning on and tuning out.

But the obsessive spirit that once drove Chiriani to dream up *Creation,* the twenty-five by fifty foot mural a section of which was exhibited in that first Tibor de Nagy show, has since then driven him into obsessive schemes that are less successful. In the early Eighties, Chiriani exhibited a series of four paintings of a rural marsh viewed at various times of the year. The composition was nothing much—just a flat expanse of weedy water, edged with bits of undistinguished landscape. Chiriani went at his marsh with a verve that was astounding but also ultimately somehow out of scale with the modesty of the subject. Lavishing all of his representational skills on marsh grass, he came up with images that had the sharp-focus banality of mid-nineteenth-century English painting. I don't think Chiriani ever intentionally goes for cheap effects. In the marsh series his plodding skillfulness was interesting; but this was low-level pleasure, and carried through four paintings it was too, too much. Chiriani's shows have been full of misbegotten ideas: some landscape paintings on supports with curving edges have recalled (one hopes inadvertently) television screens. On the other hand, he has had his real winners—generally when he returned to his earliest ideas, as in *C.E.I. On The Lake,* a scene of people at ease in a surburban park, where man and nature are transformed into similar geometric forms. The effect of the regular, faceted forms that Chiriani uses here parallel the effect of Seurat's dots in *Sunday Afternoon on the Grand Jatte*: it's a way of abstracting nature, of giving nature a cerebral urban lyricism.

The main attraction at Chiriani's recent show at Robert Schoelkopf was a cycle of paintings done from New York bridges. Chiriani began the project in 1982 on a grant from the Ingram Merrill Foundation, and I must admit that when I originally learned of Chiriani's plan, I was skeptical—it sounded like an even more obsessive version of that marsh project. And it was going to be harder to carry out, since Chiriani was planning to paint bridges—and the city—from vantage points on other bridges, sitting hour by hour, week by week, in tight spots high above the water. (At Schoelkopf there was a photograph of the artist, wearing his hard hat, perched on one of the bridges, painting. This is a new twist in the plein-air tradition.) As it turns out, *View from the Manhattan Bridge* (43¾" x 80") is one of the best things Chiriani has ever done. Working in gouache on paper, he transforms the Brooklyn Bridge and lower Manhattan into a geometric fantasy. He sees the skyscrapers as a child's building blocks, and he knows which details to include and which to exclude. It's the Manhattan of dreams (no dirt, no poverty): the New York City one saw in the elementary school textbooks of several generations ago. Here Chiriani's obsessiveness catches us up; we can study the off-ramps of the bridge descending into the dark of lower Manhattan, and we can admire the cunning with which the bridge is constructed. (You feel sure that Chiriani has become an expert on bridge construction.) He knows how to point up the fantasy; a little blimp, floating high up in the sky, is straight out of the world of Le Douanier Rousseau.

The mystery of Chiriani at this point is

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why, if he's capable of a work of the caliber of *View from the Manhattan Bridge,* he gets bogged down in the dutiful, banal views that fill the rest of his show. What's magical in *View from the Manhattan Bridge* becomes dogged elsewhere. The beautifully clear, spare sense of color and paint handling too often turns cold or mushy. (I also fail to see the point of a fifty-six by ninety-five-inch pastel.) It's difficult to escape a sense that the obsessive fantasist of Chiriani's best work fears his own penchant for fantasy, wants to prove to us that he has his feet planted firmly on the ground. In the smaller room at Schoelkopf there were some landscape paintings done with a light Impressionist brushstroke that's completely out of Chiriani's range. Why is he doing this pastoral bilge? When people reach their forties (Chiriani is forty-five), they sometimes get the idea that it's time to be sensible, to settle down. But for an artist becoming sensible may be tantamount to going insane. When Chiriani is really clicking, he shows us how a dreamer's sensibility can merge realism with surrealism. There's room for enormous growth here—for more complex structural geometries, for a more thoroughgoing fantasy of topology as a way of seeing the world. Perhaps with the completion of the New York bridge series Chiriani will feel he's done his bit for reality. I just hope he still has it in him to be crazy after all these years.

Actors. In Stephen Taylor Woodrow's "Living Paintings," which were at the New Museum for twelve days in February, three young men, dressed in suits and overcoats with wide, nineteenth-century-looking lapels, are suspended for seven hours a day from three panels that hang on the wall. Each figure is spray-painted the same monochromatic color as the panel in low relief representing a corner of an interior, so that the three compositions make up a triptych in somber, Brice Marden-ish hues. Hanging in the main gallery at the New Museum, before a crowd that even on a weekday afternoon numbered about fifty people, the three actors looked like a cross between young punks and nineteenth-century dignitaries. The New Museum press release said something about "the vague and ambiguous interrelationships of reality and illusion," but the actual event was, thank goodness, humorous. (On the floor beneath each "painting" was a little heap of litter—the leftovers from the food the actors ate during their daily stints.) Looking at the three dudded-up fellas hanging there—taking off a pair of shades, running a hand through a clump of hair, recrossing a leg, taking a little stretch—we were only being carried into a more extreme state of the see-and-be-seen mentality that's a cornerstone of downtown life. Woodrow's "Living Paintings" come out of a world where most every man is to some degree a dandy, and the "Living Paintings" are just the narcissism of the dandy carried to an extreme: they pose, you contemplate, and nothing much else goes on. The humor of the seduction was obviously on the actors' minds. One, who was eating a banana while I was there, offered a bite from it to a woman in the audience. She accepted. The Living Paintings were on televison, National Public Radio, and were treated as a news story in the *Times.* The New Museum had an avant-garde hit. The message was that the avant-garde can be fun (and you didn't have to stay any longer than you pleased).

Autobiographers. David McDermott and Peter McGough, the friends who have for the past five years been showing paintings done in a self-consciously primitive style, made a breakthrough in their series of autobiographical drawings which were at Massimo Audiello in February. Working on twenty-five-inch squares of brown paper in colored crayon, they've illustrated their life stories in thirty scenes that recall the graphic styles of Georg Grosz and Florine Stettheimer. Their technique is still primitive; but the blocky shapes and rigid contours add something to the story—they give it a spare, unsentimental charm. We see the suburban houses McDermott and McGough grew up in and vignettes of the unforgotten images of childhood: David's grandmother,

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a busty woman standing very straight, as if ready to be photographed; the funky lady in the harlequin glasses who drove the Holy Family School bus. They're humorous about the painful and wistful memories of childhood and adolescence: the alienation of a boy who spent his time off in a corner drawing while his friends played ball; a Laurentian first sexual encounter in a secluded forest pond. In the New York scenes the drama heats up. It's an update on the stories of hayseeds who arrive in the Big City and become bohemians—the kind of people that Dawn Powell described in her novels of the Forties. There are chaotic, come-as-you-are parties; mornings in Bowery lofts where the young artists camped out under leaky ceilings; an argument with Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf, whose Hawaii funk garb makes quite a contrast to the Edwardian get-up of McDermott and McGough. In one of the best scenes there's been some sort of disaster in their apartment—things are broken all over—and one of the duo sits weeping in a chair.

Everyone knows downtown life is a great subject; the question is who—a writer, a painter—is up to it. (As a rule, gossip columnists do better than serious fiction writers.) McDermott and McGough have the equanimity to step back and see themselves and their world clear. Their humor has some detail to it. We might just be witnessing the debut of a powerful graphic imagination.

Romantic. The announcement of a historical retrospective can be an occasion for trepidation, because we've learned by now that there's such a thing as seeing more of an artist than we ever wanted to see. Some shows even offer more than we imagine the artist himself might want to see in one place at one time. It's a conundrum that a man of the caliber of Pierre Rosenberg, who organized the gigantic Fragonard show that's currently at the Metropolitan, should have so little sense of proportion. Two hundred and twenty Fragonards? Perhaps the matter is out of his hands; perhaps the only way to get funding is by doing the definitive show. Nowadays, with rising insurance premiums and serious doubts about the safety of moving works of art, every show is accompanied by a warning that it's going to be the last of its kind. The 1980s may turn out to be the Götterdämmerung of Big Museum Shows.

Fragonard survives the mega-retrospective treatment as the peculiarly unresolved artist one always knew him to be. Admiring the sketchy calligraphy of his smaller paintings in museums around the world, one sometimes imagines that there's another, more complete side to Fragonard. But one also knows from experience that, save for the cycle in the Frick, which is a masterpiece of decorative painting, Fragonard has no large synthetic vision. The retrospective only confirms this. In the catalogue, Pierre Rosenberg observes that the *Fête at St. Cloud,* a much-heralded loan from the Banque de France, has been judged by some art historians to be on a level with Watteau's *Shopsign.* My own reaction was exactly the opposite. The only way I could believe for one minute in this fête, with its leatherette trees and fashion-illustration figures, was by keeping Watteau out of my mind.

The greatest Fragonards are the ones that the Goncourt Brothers and Fragonard's other nineteenth-century admirers prized: the boudoir scenes—which are graphically and yet somehow also delicately erotic—and the landscape drawings from Fragonard's two trips to Italy. It's one of the paradoxes of Fragonard's art that these drawings are more specific and satisfactorily finished than most of his paintings. With the great red chalk drawings of Tivoli from the first Italian stay of 1756-1761, Fragonard takes his place at the beginning of the romantic age. In the ancient gardens of Italy the artifice of a man-made setting is giving way to something wild, beyond man's control. The overarching trees, the moss-covered ruins, the tiny figures have a romantic power that goes way beyond literary conceit. Nature is exploding the garden. The Renaissance has come to a close.

Fragonard is one of those eighteenth-cen-

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tury artists (Chardin is another) whose art had gone out of fashion even before the artist had died. The whole century—with its tremendous social changes signaling the collapse of the patronage system that had supported painting and sculpture for centuries—was in some ways inimical to art. Surely the eighteenth century is less rich in painting than either the seventeenth or the nineteenth. Going through the Fragonard retrospective, one had the sense of an artist who didn't quite understand his own gifts—who didn't always know quite what he ought to do with them. He did a great many figure paintings; and yet even when they're beautifully worked-up, they're façades, with nobody home.

Ultimately the mega-retrospective may tell us less about the artist than about the organizers. Rare is the artist whose every scrap we want to see. Fragonard *is* a great painter. It's only our ridiculously overblown expectations that can make him seem small.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

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Dance

Robbins, dances

by Eva Resnikova

Jerome Robbins, who since the death of Balanchine in 1983 has shared with Peter Martins the title of co-ballet master in chief of New York City Ballet, was conspicuous by his absence at a press conference last May at which Martins announced that the company would open its spring 1988 season on April 26 with a festival devoted to the music of American composers. The real news, though, was Martins's confirmation of rumors that he had invited as guest choreographers some who, as he delicately put it, "speak a slightly different language, or perhaps dialect, from us." These included not only the moderns Paul Taylor and Lar Lubovich but the postmoderns Laura Dean and William Forsythe. Lincoln Kirstein, the company's general director, and longtime defender of the classical faith, offered the amusingly double-barreled prediction that the festival would be "a kind of enormous hors d'oeuvre."

As for Robbins, the story in the *Times* the following day was that he was rehearsing at the time of the press conference. Furthermore, he would not be participating in the festival, owing to a "previous commitment" —presumably his intention to return to Broadway for the first time in over twenty years with a retrospective of his musical-theater choreography. In an interview with a *Times* theater reporter in December, Robbins formally announced an October 1988 Broadway opening, to coincide with his seventieth birthday.

Though Robbins has always made clear his preference for ballet, he does not share Kirstein's contempt for all the alternatives. Indeed, Robbins's receptivity to new modes of expression in dance and music, from the postwar jazz of *Fancy Free* to the post-modern minimalism of *Glass Pieces,* has led to accusations of trendiness. One can only speculate on the reasons for his distancing himself from the American Music Festival, but his response to the theater reporter when asked why he had preferred working with New York City Ballet all these years rather than on the commercial stage is telling: "I've been very satisfied doing my ballets, working with my own company—the sense of family, the sense of dedication to the work." He cannot have been overly pleased at the prospect of a bunch of strangers invading his home and availing themselves of his talented children.

Whether Robbins was really unable to participate in the American Music Festival because of the show, or decided to do the show as a convenient means of absenting himself from the festivities, the subsequent postponement of his Broadway opening to early 1989 allowed him both to "participate" in the festival and to remain aloof from it by creating an American ballet for the end of the New York City Ballet's winter 1987-88 season that would also serve as his sole new contribution to the spring season. Unveiled on February 4, *Ives, Songs* is a work

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for thirty-eight dancers (thirty-nine at its second performance) set to eighteen of Charles Ives's songs with piano accompaniment. It is far from a suite de danses, however. Robbins has selected and arranged the songs to form a narrative whose subject is clearly a man looking back on his life. It is a shockingly literal work in a medium and a milieu in which abstraction is highly prized.

Robbins has always had a strong narrative impulse, though in the past he has often sought to deny it—famously so in the case of his 1969 Chopin piano ballet *Dances at a Gathering*. So insistent were viewers (and critics) in discerning programmatic content in this supposedly abstract work that the choreographer felt compelled to write a letter to the editor of *Ballet Review* insisting that "there are no stories to any of the dances in *Dances at a Gathering*. There are no plots and no roles. The dancers are themselves dancing with each other in that space." More recently, the blunt title of *Opus 19,* to Prokofiev's first violin concerto, served as a warning to those who would seek extramusical meanings in the choreography. Robbins's subsequent softening of the proscription by the addition of the subtitle "The Dreamer" amounted to an admission that such meanings existed, though they remain far from scrutable.

In *Ives, Songs* there is no such coyness about programmatic content. The dreamer is a gray-haired man in a business suit who watches from the sidelines or wanders in and out among the action, unnoticed by the others until the final song, an elegy, in which all the characters reappear and commingle. When he confronts them, they disappear. The only warning this work's title holds is contained in the seemingly errant comma, which serves to separate the artist from his creation. The life being portrayed onstage should not be taken as that of the composer, it insists, or, by extension, the choreographer's: a warning that may be as safely ignored as his previous protestations.

Ives, Songs begins with idealized images of childhood that Robbins illustrates with literal gestures: to the phrase "the patter of little feet" from "The Children's Hour" (Longfellow), for example, Robbins has the three girls—who are actually named in the poem—take tiny steps on pointe. There follows a group of songs to texts by the composer. To a colloquial first-person account of "sitting in the opera house . . . waiting for the curtain to arise," Robbins has set a meticulously timed mild slapstick routine for the three girls and a wooden bench. A waltz introduces two boys in knee pants who get a laugh with their awkward attempts at imitating the girls' graceful balancés. At the mention of the words "wedding day," an adult couple in period dress flashes by in a fleet waltz.

"The Cage" introduces the first hint of serious concerns: a boy watches a caged leopard pacing and wonders, "Is life anything like that?" A man mimes the stalking cat, and the boy literally follows in his footsteps. The mood lightens with "The See'r," a nonsense verse ending in a dozen repetitions of the word "going." Here the boy gets a chance to test his independence with a lively solo full of flexed-foot cabrioles. "Two Little Flowers" returns to images of idyllic childhood, but this time instead of children being spied upon at play, they are performing for an audience. When at the end the two girls—again, named—are pronounced "fairest, rarest of them all," they acknowledge the compliment by demurely curtseying to us.

The ballet changes gear with "At the River" (Robert Lowry), which introduces religious imagery and the community. "Shall we gather at the river?" goes the first line of the poem, and couples enter from all sides. The choreography becomes abstract, with slow-motion overhead lifts and falls. At the mention of the name of Jesus in "Serenity" (Whittier), the couples separate to form two circles, the women inside, the men out. The last word of this poem is "peace"; the poem that follows, "He Is There!" (Ives), is a patriotic exhortation to "rally round the Flag boys . . . Shouting the battle cry of Freedom." A crowd of boys rushes on, jumping up and down and literally waving

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small flags. They express their exuberance by turning cartwheels and reprising the flexed-foot cabrioles of the boy in "The See'r." World War I helmets are distributed, and the boys exit miming the thrusting of bayonets. As they reach the wings, some among them clutch at their heart and shoot suddenly upward.

In "Tom Sails Away" (Ives), the composer looks back at his childhood. At the line "Mother with Tom in her arms is coming towards the garden," the woman we glimpsed earlier waltzing on her wedding day enters with a bundled infant in her arms. The father returns home "from the mill," and the entire family gathers in a cluster. At the words "Today Tom, Tom sailed away for, for over there," a young man in uniform suddenly emerges from among them. A group of soldiers peek in from the wings; he joins them and they disappear.

The ballet again changes gear as the choreography becomes increasingly abstract, the mood unremittingly somber. In "The White Gulls" (Maurice Morris), five boys imitate wheeling birds that symbolize the "souls of men that call and cry." "Songs My Mother Taught Me" (Heyduk) shows the females on the home front, four women and two girls who dance with linked arms, united in the tears "flowing from my memory's treasure." During "There Is a Lane" (Harmony Ives, the composer's wife) and "In Summer Fields" (Hermann Almers), two of the little girls sit on the side and watch as adult couples dance to words that hint at the joys of remembered love. The dissonant music to which an excerpt from "Incantation" (Byron) is set inspires the dark mood of a pas de deux. A woman in green (Stephanie Saland) suggests pain with abdominal contractions, and in off-balance partnered promenades she seems to be trying to pull away from the man, whom we soon recognize as Death. At the end he encircles her from behind with his arms and carries her off.

"Autumn" (Harmony Ives) is a promise of serenity in death. A woman in blue (Helene Alexopoulos or Simone Schumacher) bourrées with her head held back, symbolizing the earth "whose work is done," who "turns her face for the sun to smile upon," bringing "the Peace of God." "Like a Sick Eagle" (Keats), with its intimations of mortality, shifts the focus back to the dreamer, who wanders among three boys performing unison movement. In the final "Elegie" (Louis Gallet), on a darkened, side-lit stage that casts long shadows, all the figures from the man's past reappear: the woman in blue, bourréeing backward, to whom he reaches out but who doesn't see him; the waltzing couple; the soldiers; the young boys and girls. They form a tight group, the children in front, and he and they regard each other dispassionately. The group cleaves to let him pass, then divides again and slowly exits at each corner of the stage, leaving the dreamer alone in the center.

Ives, Songs is unusual for Robbins in its use of the music of an American composer who is not his contemporary, and in its aura of nostalgia. Though Ives lived until 1954, he effectively retired from composing in 1919, and the retrospective nature of his music, especially the songs, places his sensibility around the turn of the century, when he first began composing.

There have always existed two schools of thought on Ives. One sees him as a daring experimentalist, with his use of dissonant counterpoint, quarter tones, polytonality, and polyrhythms—a view that has become less tenable in the light of recent research revealing that the composer backdated works thought to have anticipated innovations of the European avant-garde. The other sees him in a less exalted light, as, in the words of Virgil Thomson, "a homespun Yankee tinkerer." To Thomson, writing in 1970, the latter-day popularity of Ives's music was due not to its technique but to its "direct expressivity." Ives's premature retirement from composing Thomson sees as a direct result of the First World War, which revealed to him "the darker aspects of the world, which he had avoided ever and of which his music, all health and exuberance, shows no trace."

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This is especially evident in the songs. Ives took seriously the saccharine sentiment of phrases like "the patter of little feet" and the unalloyed jingoism of "He Is There!," and Robbins's choreographic response is remarkably straightforward. The only hint of irony in the entire forty-minute work is the glimpse of the slaughter to come as the idealistic young soldiers exit upstage.

In *Ives, Songs* Robbins has allowed himself unapologetically to embrace the narrative impulse and the direct appeal to the emotions that had existed uneasily in his previous work. The impetus for this change of heart, as well as for the unaccustomed attitude of nostalgia, could well have come from the contemplation of his past entailed by preparations for the Broadway retrospective. The very structure and content of *Ives, Songs* refers back to a theatrical device introduced in the newly integrated "musical play" of the Forties, the "dream ballet," which Agnes de Mille used to help Laurey make up her mind in *Oklahoma!*—a year before Robbins's first foray into musical comedy with *On the Town,* whose Coney Island ballet gets dreamed when the sailor hero falls asleep on the subway. Whereas *On the Town* had a contemporary urban setting, a precedent for a nostalgic look back at pre-World War I New England exists in the 1947 *High Button Shoes,* which garnered Robbins's first Tony Award, for a comic chase ballet that ends in a jumble of bodies topped by a Keystone Cop—waving a flag.

Ives, Songs is a work of maturity and confidence, of deftness and sureness of hand, that is miles away from the intellectual posturing and exploitation of Robbins's last major work, *In Memory Of . . .* . In reminding us of where his considerable talents lie, *Ives, Songs* makes us eager to see them in service to a genre in which literalness and sentimentality can be valued assets.

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Music

Kurt Herbert Adler 1905-1988

by Samuel Lipman

Within a very few hours this past February 9, the San Francisco Opera, second in America only to the Metropolitan in New York, suffered two shocks. The first affected the present. The second affected the past—and our memory of it.

The first shock was the retirement, caused by what the official announcement described as diabetes, of Terence McEwen, the company's general director since 1982. Mr. McEwen, a former executive for Decca Records (known as London in this country), seemed at the beginning of his reign a proponent of what might be called a "singers first" policy. The effect of this approach to running an opera company was an emphasis on safety, and upon the programming of widely attractive works featuring distinguished artists. In McEwen's hands, performance standards—very much including conducting—were often high. I remember in particular an *Elektra* in 1984 beautifully sung by Janis Martin and conducted by Jeffrey Tate. Moreover, San Francisco's *Ring,* as conducted by Edo de Waart (the former music director of the San Francisco Symphony), was triumphantly received. Recently, despite economic pressures which forced the cancellation of a significant portion of the company's activity, McEwen had seemed ready to begin widening the San Francisco repertory. One of his efforts in this regard was the commissioning of Hugo Weisgall to write an opera based on Racine's *Esther* for the 1991 season.

The second shock—the shock to memory—was the death, almost immediately after the press conference about McEwen, of Kurt Herbert Adler, the general director of the San Francisco Opera from 1957 until his retirement in 1981. *The New York Times* obituary (written by John Rockwell), after giving the essential facts of Adler's career, properly enumerated his brilliant achievements. Above all, perhaps, Adler accomplished the two necessary tasks of the great opera administrator: he not only brought in wonderful singers, he also supplemented the great and accepted masterworks of the past with a rigorously chosen conspectus of the operatic composition of our time.

These achievements are described, in both photographs and words, in *The Adler Years,* a charming booklet the company put out at the time of Adler's retirement.[1] Here is graphic evidence of just how deeply the San Francisco Opera is embedded in the artistic and political life of the city. Here is evidence, too, of the brilliant artists Adler engaged during his tenure: the singers Lisa Della Casa, Placido Domingo, Hans Hotter, Sena Jurinac, Birgit Nilsson, Leontyne Price, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, and Rita Streich; and the conductors Christoph von Dohnányi, János Ferencsik, Rafael Kubelík, Leopold Ludwig, Pierre Monteux, Georges Prêtre, and William Steinberg. Among the

1 *The Adler Years,* edited by Koraljka Lockhart; San Francisco Opera Association, 1981.

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twentieth-century operas Adler bravely chose to program (considering the limited resources and public in San Francisco) were many interesting works, including *Il Prigioniero* (Dallapiccola), *Blood Moon* (Dello Joio), *The Visit of the Old Lady* (von Einem), *Joan of Arc at the Stake* (Honegger), *Angel of Repose* (Imbrie), *Die Kluge* (Orff), *The Visitation* (Schuller), *Katerina Ismailova* (Shostakovich), *Troilus and Cressida* (Walton), part of *Christopher Columbus* (Milhaud), and the first American performances of *The Makropoulos Case* (Janáček) and *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* (Strauss). Unmentioned in the San Francisco souvenir booklet (but listed in the *Times* obituary) were performances of *Lear* (Reimann), *Carry Nation* (Moore), and *The Crucible* (Ward). All of this, I hardly need add, stands in the starkest contrast to the stagnation of the repertory in our largest traditional opera houses.

Kurt Herbert Adler, the man who transformed the fall season of standard operas he inherited into an almost year-round presentation of staples *and* new works, was yet another example of the musical riches showered upon this country by the murderous behavior of Adolf Hitler. Born in Vienna in 1905, Adler was already an experienced opera conductor by the time of the *Anschluss* in 1938, for he had conducted in opera houses in Germany, Italy, and Czechoslovakia, and had been an assistant to Arturo Toscanini at Salzburg in 1936. His first engagement in the United States was at the Chicago Opera in 1938. By 1943 he had become chorus master at the San Francisco Opera, where he was to finish out his career (with remarkably few professional divagations elsewhere). It must be said that not the least remarkable aspect of his tenure was his total identification with the fortunes of the San Francisco Opera, to the exclusion of any possibility of a wider national and international career.

The San Francisco Opera which Adler joined in 1943 had been founded in 1923 by another conductor, the Italian Gaetano Merola (1881-1953). Quickly taking root in the music-loving town and appealing equally to the many Italian immigrants in the city and to the upper crust of Bay Area fortunes, the company possessed two inestimable advantages—in addition, that is, to the Mediterranean charm and solid musical instincts of Merola: the first-class San Francisco Symphony Orchestra (conducted in symphony concerts by the great Pierre Monteux) and the majestically imposing—and acoustically sympathetic—War Memorial Opera House. As a result, the company survived the Depression and World War II, and by the postwar years was poised for further growth.[2]

Excellent as was much of what Merola did—including the return of the unfairly politically suspect Flagstad, for example, for performances of *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Walküre* in 1949 (well before the Metropolitan in New York)—his view of opera, always Italianate, became increasingly fixed on the last century. Indeed, in the last decade or so before his death in 1953, San Francisco did very few operas written since World War I—only the scarcely daring three short Puccini operas of the 1918 *Trittico*, and the even more backward-looking Puccini opera of 1926, *Turandot*. With Adler's rise to authority, all this was to change, and the magnitude of this change constitutes his chief claim to a place in the history of American operatic performance.

It must be said that Adler was a vastly underestimated conductor. Tapes of two San Francisco performances, one of the 1980 *Tristan* and the other of the 1981 *Die Meistersinger*, testify to what a significant leader on the podium he eventually became. Listening to these tapes, one is immediately aware that Adler was able to convey at all times the certainty that he knew from inside the music itself just what made these com-

2 A fascinating history of the company's first half century, well worth reading by those interested in non-New York musical history, has been written by San Francisco music critic Arthur Bloomfield: *50 Years of the San Francisco Opera* (San Francisco Book Company, 1972).

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plex scores breathe and live.[3] This may seem small beer: after all, isn't such disciplined knowledge what conducting ought to be about? Unfortunately, attending just about any night at the Metropolitan Opera or the New York City Opera will make clear that there is now a dismaying shortage of conductors who can convince the listener that they really know how the music goes. Adler's Wagner, on the evidence of the *Tristan* and *Meistersinger* tapes, was firm and passionate, and structurally coherent. High praise these days, indeed.

It must also be said that Adler was scarcely an easy man with colleagues or, I suspect, with subordinates. Though I had met him many years before in San Francisco, my personal knowledge of him came from the years between 1983 and 1986, when we served together on the National Council on the Arts, the advisory board of the National Endowment for the Arts. In our own relations, I felt that Adler never quite saw me as older than the teenager I was when we first met. In public discussion, he proved to be a close and often critical reader of the bureaucratic documents that came our way, and a valiant defender of opera as well. Curiously, for a man so richly talented and experienced, he seemed almost diffident about urging his considered opinions on his peers.

But this relatively retiring behavior in Washington doubtless can be explained by Adler's age and by the fact that the National Endowment for the Arts is only an art-encouraging, and not an art-producing, enterprise. On his home turf, he was by all accounts acerbic, dominating, and short with those with whom he disagreed, and he ran his company through will and energy more than through charm. But neither will nor energy, as estimable as these qualities are for running a musical institution, would have availed had Adler not possessed the requisite musical distinction. It is this distinction which leaps out from his choice of repertory and from his conducting.

Though it is clear from the historical record that it is the music of great operas that makes them immortal, it is nonetheless fashionable these days to stress the theatrical, rather than the musical, component of opera. There are good reasons, I suppose, for this shift: I have earlier mentioned problems in finding conductors, and there is now a world-wide shortage of great voices—and an even greater shortage of singers who can make the best use of the voices they have. The most glamorous new opera is now in the hands of the directors—as the masterful role of Peter Sellars in determining the shape of John Adams's musically threadbare and over-repetitious *Nixon in China* demonstrates. Classic works are subjected in Europe to tendentious re-workings by directorial stars from the theater who might be more at home on the barricades than in the opera house; in America, as the career of Franco Zeffirelli at the Metropolitan has shown, it is the largest crowd scenes and the most vulgar sets, not the authenticity of the vocal performances or the distinction of the conducting, that pack the audiences in.

While Adler was always alive in San Francisco to production values, and open to experimentation with new technological developments in staging, his forte was the music, and the drama of opera achieved through the music. In this he only followed in the footsteps of those renowned conductors who have been the principal vivifying influences on twentieth-century operatic practice: Gustav Mahler (Vienna Opera), Arturo Toscanini (La Scala, Milan), Sir Thomas Beecham (various theaters in London), Otto Klemperer (Krolloper, Berlin), and Herbert von Karajan (Vienna Opera and Salzburg Festival). In the vastly more limited context of opera in San Francisco—and in America—the contribution of Kurt Herbert Adler is as honorable, and as secure, as that of any of his world-famous colleagues. We shall miss him.

3 For those who would like to search out these tapes, I should add that the *Tristan,* with Spas Wenkoff and Gwyneth Jones as the lovers, is poorly sung; the *Meistersinger,* with the excellent Karl Ridderbusch as Hans Sachs, is altogether a finer total performance.

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Books

The trials of a poet

by Robert Richman

The first thing one notices about Karl Shapiro's *New & Selected Poems, 1940-1986* is the slimness of the volume.[1] Shapiro, who is seventy-four years old, has written some fourteen books of verse—beginning with *Person, Place and Thing,* published in 1942 when the author was a sergeant in the U.S. Army Medical Corps, up through *Love & War Art & God,* which came out four years ago. This substantial body of work, most of which is unavailable, has been reduced by Shapiro to 103 pages. It is therefore no surprise that *New & Selected Poems, 1940-1986* gives no sense of the scale of Shapiro's oeuvre. What it offers instead is only an outline of the twists and turns of the poet's interesting career. Indeed, *New & Selected Poems, 1940-1986* seems to suggest that Shapiro believes the thing of fundamental interest in his career is the contours of its development.

Not that these contours are wholly without interest. Shapiro's early poetry, written during the war, is indebted to W. H. Auden, whose influence in the United States was then at its highest point. (The early poetry of John Berryman and Delmore Schwartz, two of Shapiro's contemporaries, also owes something to Auden's work.) The Auden that Shapiro drew from, however, isn't the Eliot-inspired one of *Poems* (1930), but rather the Auden who by the mid-Thirties had abandoned the deliberate difficulty of modernism for a more accessible style and subject matter. Auden sought, through his use of the language of journalism, advertising, and psychology, to give the raw data of the contemporary world a pre-eminent place in his poetry. This went against Eliot, who incorporated the objects of reality only insofar as they could be given a symbolic meaning or emotion.

It was the abandonment of the symbol- and metaphor-making impulse that the young Karl Shapiro found appealing in Auden's poetry. Later on in his career, in the essays of *In Defense of Ignorance* (1960) and *To Abolish Children* (1968), Shapiro would refine and elaborate Auden's anti-modernist position. He would later maintain, for instance, that symbols are hazardous because they make the poet feel all-powerful. He would insist that the step from transforming reality in a poem to trying to alter the world itself is a dangerously short one. (For proof of this, Shapiro declared, one need only look at Yeats, Eliot, and Pound.) "[T]he world of symbols and its attendant dreams of transcendental knowledge," writes Shapiro in an essay called "The Career of the Poem," from *To Abolish Children,* often delude the poet into thinking he can "speak for the race."

What Shapiro gleaned from Auden, even early in his career, was the necessity of placing oneself and one's poetic powers in the service of reality, not the reverse; of being willing to be mastered *by* reality rather than

1 *New & Selected Poems, 1940-1986,* by Karl Shapiro; University of Chicago Press, 103 pages, $9.95.

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master it. For Shapiro, this meant the virtual elimination of the poetic ego that transmutes objects into a network of symbolic meaning and emotion. What he appropriated from Auden was a more modest conception of the poet than that suggested by the modernists. Shapiro's remark in "The Career of the Poem"—about how the poet is "neither messiah nor explorer but only a man fully alive in spirit and in body to existence itself"—is really nothing more than an embellishment of Auden's well-known remarks in his essay "Writing" (from *The Dyer's Hand*):

> Poetry is not magic [wrote Auden]. In so far as poetry, or any other of the arts, can be said to have an ulterior purpose, it is, by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate.

"To disenchant and disintoxicate" is certainly the "ulterior purpose" of all of Shapiro's early poetry. In "University," for example, from *Person, Place and Thing,* the poet seeks to expose the prejudices of this particular institution. The poem begins: "To hurt the Negro and avoid the Jew/Is the curriculum." In "Necropolis," also from Shapiro's first book, the poet challenges the idea of death as the great equalizer. The third stanza reads:

> And even in death the poor are thickly herded
> In intimate congestion under streets and alleys.
> Look at the standard sculpture, the cheap
> Synonymous slabs, the machined crosses.

In "Washington Cathedral," also from *Person, Place and Thing,* the poet points out the "fake magnificence" of the nation's capital. Only here, says Shapiro, would Lincoln be "whittled to a fool's colossus."

Shapiro's commitment to the objective world does not always translate into satire or the shedding of illusions. One of Shapiro's best early poems, "Haircut" (from *Person, Place and Thing*), deals with the "wonderful nonsense"

> . . . of lotions of Lucky Tiger,
> Of savory soaps and oils of bottle-bright green,
> The gold of liqueurs, the unguents of Newark and Niger,
> Powders and balms and waters washing me clean . . .
>
> Scissors and comb are mowing my hair into neatness,
> Now pruning my ears, now smoothing my neck like a plain;
> In the harvest of hair and the chaff of powdery sweetness
> My snow-covered slopes grow dark with the wooly rain.

Here, the poet "tells the truth" about what he sees, as Auden advised; this time, however, he musters a considerable amount of linguistic invention for a seemingly trivial facet of modern life that most poets would not be attracted to.

We see the same loving attention to the details of the everyday world in other poems of this period as well—"Buick," "Drug Store," and "Waitress," to name just a few. In "Auto Wreck" from *Person, Place and Thing,* Shapiro handles a grim detail of contemporary life with delicacy and artistry:

> Its quick soft silver bell beating, beating,
> And down the dark one ruby flare
> Pulsing out red light like an artery,
> The ambulance at top speed floating down
> Past beacons and illuminated clocks
> Wings in a heavy curve, dips down,
> And brakes speed, entering the crowd.
> The doors leap open, emptying light;
> Stretchers are laid out, the mangled lifted
> And stowed into the little hospital.
> Then the bell, breaking the hush, tolls once,
> And the ambulance with its terrible cargo
> Rocking, slightly rocking, moves away,
> As the doors, an afterthought, are closed . . . .

To focus on the mundane without making it "mean" through the use of a symbolic structure is not a recipe for poetic profundity. But then, Shapiro doesn't appear to want to be profound. Insofar as he aspires only to be "fully alive . . . to existence itself," these early poems are eminently successful.

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Nonetheless, as the Forties advanced, Shapiro was evidently becoming unhappy with his work. He was beginning to believe that he wasn't letting *enough* reality into his poems. And he was right: there's more to the world, after all, than automobiles, drugstores, and waitresses. There is, for example, the poet himself. Weren't the poet's ordinary thoughts and feelings a part of reality, too, and therefore worthy of being included in poetry that was truly open to "existence itself"? What Shapiro was contemplating didn't involve violating Auden's golden rule and altering the world for the sake of a private meaning. All he wished to do was make the poet's more unexceptional thoughts and perceptions a part of the procession of reality in his verse. How to present these perceptions raised another problem—the limitations of formal metrics. Didn't rhyme and meter alter reality, too? Didn't the things of the world need to be expressed as honestly as possible, without the poet's resorting to any artifice whatsoever?

Shapiro didn't act on these new thoughts right away. But *Essay on Rime,* the seventy-two-page poem that was published as a book a year after his second book, *V-Letter* (1944), contains evidence that he was beginning to explore them. Ostensibly, the book is not so different from *V-Letter* or *Person, Place and Thing.* Though written in the first person, *Essay on Rime* is spoken by Shapiro the poet—not Shapiro the man—and is therefore about as impersonal as his earlier verse. And it is composed in the most punctilious blank verse. All the same, Shapiro later called *Essay on Rime* his "first anti-intellectual essay," and for good reason. The poem contained warm words for the poetry of Walt Whitman, D. H. Lawrence, and William Carlos Williams—all poets distinctly unlike both Shapiro and Auden in their celebration of feeling (Whitman and Lawrence) and the unobstructed representation of reality (Williams). In the section on Williams, Shapiro writes respectfully of the New Jersey poet's world, in which "vision reigns, [and] nothing is right/Except the visible. The object is the thing,/The means of understanding is eyesight." In a passage near the end of *Essay on Rime,* Shapiro wonders where in contemporary literature one can find "the plain/Statement of feeling."

The chief aim of *Essay on Rime,* however, is to demonstrate how possible it is for a young poet to come to terms with poetry on his own, without recourse to tradition or the academy. (That Shapiro wrote *Essay on Rime* while on duty in the Pacific "proved" this hypothesis.) Although his attack on literary tradition—in the form of an appreciation of Lawrence, Whitman, and Williams—makes *Essay on Rime* a significant book, Shapiro's *New & Selected Poems, 1940-1986* makes no reference to it.

Interestingly, *Essay on Rime* was honored by F. O. Matthiessen in a front-page review in *The New York Times Book Review.* Matthiessen, a Marxist who paradoxically championed Eliot and Henry James, addressed himself primarily to Shapiro's mastery of simple language. Concentrating on lines like—

> At what point in the history of art
> Has such a cleavage between audience
> And poet existed? Where before has rime
> Relied so heavily on the interpreter,
> The analyst and the critic?

—Matthiessen commended Shapiro for "bridging the gap between the poet and the democratic audience of the Nineteen Fifties."

"Recapitulations," the sequence leading off Shapiro's next book, *Trial of a Poet* (1947)—dedicated to Matthiessen—exhibits the first significant change in Shapiro's poetry. The sequence of sixteen formal poems is entirely autobiographical. Unfortunately, "Recapitulations" seldom rises above the banal. The first poem begins:

> I was born downtown on a wintry day
> And under the roof where Poe expired;
> Tended by nuns my mother lay
> Dark-haired and beautiful and tired.
>
> Doctors and cousins paid their call,
> The rabbi and my father helped.

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A crucifix burned on the wall
Of the bright room where I was whelped.

Shapiro has omitted "Recapitulations" from *New & Selected Poems, 1940-1986,* and for good reason.

The new work in Shapiro's next book, *Poems 1940-1953* (1953), contains more changes. In these poems, Shapiro, much in the custom of Lawrence, transcribes his inner thoughts, no matter how dull they may be. "Going to School," for example, begins: "What shall I teach in the vivid afternoon/ With the sun warming the blackboard and a slip/Of cloud catching my eye?" In many poems, Shapiro's thoughts focus on failure. "Ego can fail," he asserts in "Ego," while in "The Tingling Back," he frets over "something . . . I said and I should not have said,/ I did and must not do."

Other poems in *Poems 1940-1953* deal with the guilt that is in Shapiro's case apparently the consequence of this preoccupation with failure. "Adam and Eve" is a long, unsuccessful attempt to explore the origins of this guilt. In "F. O. Matthiessen: An Anniversary," Shapiro asks if he is to blame for Matthiessen's suicide leap from a hotel window:

. . . What mob did Matthiessen
Hear chanting in rhythm, and what uniforms
Tried to retrieve him to the world of men?

What was he saying in his heavy fall
Through space, so broken by the hand of stone?
What word was that stopped like a telephone
Torn with its nervous wire from the wall?
Does not the condemned man raise his voice to call
His phrase of justice down the empty hall?

And who betrayed him finally? Was it I?
Some poet who turned his praises to blame,
Some historian of the parlor game
Of war? Or the easy capture of the schloss
By Slavs? The Americanization of the spy?
The death of a friend? Was there no further loss? . . .

Shapiro rises to the occasion with some memorable language which redeems the arbitrary personal intrusion. Regrettably, "F. O. Matthiessen" has been excluded from *New & Selected Poems, 1940-1986.*

"Adam and Eve," along with "Israel" and "Six Religious Lyrics"—all from *Poems 1940-1953*—offer us a clue to the next phase of Shapiro's poetic career: the discovery of his Jewish identity. This is a strange juncture in Karl Shapiro's career. For religious affiliation would appear to be the last thing a poet like Shapiro, who has been struggling to establish some sense of individuality in his poetry, would want. Actually, "Israel" depicts the pitfalls of uniting dogma and individuality. Like most of the poems he was writing during this period, "Israel" is a showcase for Shapiro's personal feelings. But in the poem the emotions he presents are the fruit of his new identification with Judaism. He writes, for example, about how "When I think of the liberation of Palestine . . . My heart leaps forward like a hungry dog," and "When I think of the battle of Zion . . . My blood beats like a bird against a wall," and so on. The "personal" feelings Shapiro indulges in here are therefore hardly the expression of his individuality. They are rather the result of the poet's immersing himself—which is to say, losing himself—in an external cause.

Perhaps Shapiro comprehends the contradiction between the pursuit of individuality and the capitulation to religion. In what appears to be an attempt to counterbalance the religious element in "Israel," Shapiro injects himself everywhere in the poem. In the first eighteen lines of "Israel," for example, the words "I" and "my" appear nineteen times.

But for Shapiro there is another obstacle to accommodating the Jewish outlook. For the student of Auden who has made a career lending credence only to what impinges on his senses, the belief in a transcendent reality would appear to be problematic indeed. In the Introduction to *Poems of a Jew* (1958), Shapiro's next book, the poet tries to resolve this difficulty by suggesting how similar are

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his poetic perspective and the perspective of the Jew. He proclaims that the Jew is "absolutely committed to the world."

The truth is, Shapiro's Jewish poems really have little to do with a deity. Most deal with Shapiro's secular experiences as a Jew in America. They are about, that is, feeling shut out, special, and, above all, guilty. To the extent that "The First Time"—a poem about a seventeen-year-old's encounter with a prostitute—succeeds, it is because it deals with prejudices and stereotypes, not religious belief. The last two stanzas read:

> The girl is sitting with her back to him;
> She wears a black thing and she rakes her hair,
> Hauling her round face upward like moonrise;
> She is younger than he, her angled arms are slim
> And like a country girl her feet are bare.
> She watches him behind her with old eyes,
>
> Transfixing him in space like some grotesque,
> Far, far from her where he is still alone
> And being here is more and more untrue.
> Then she turns round, as one turns at a desk,
> And looks at him, too naked and too soon,
> And almost gently asks: *Are you a Jew?*

The confusion evident in *Poems of a Jew* may have contributed to the frustrated, angry tone of Shapiro's next book. *In Defense of Ignorance* (1960) is a collection of literary essays that do not so much present the poet's beliefs as ram them down the reader's throat. The book, the epigraph of which is *"everything we are taught is false"* (Shapiro's emphasis), seeks, as the author writes in the preface, to break the

> dictatorship of intellectual "modernism," the sanctimonious ministry of "the Tradition," the ugly programmatic quality of twentieth-century criticism [which] have maimed our poetry and turned it into a monstrosity of literature.

Actually, there is little sustained argument in the book. (Argument, after all, is something taught in school.) What we are offered instead is a flood of opinions that may have been vaguely heretical at the time. Lawrence and Whitman, Shapiro informs us, exhibit the "deepest concern for mankind" in their poetry. Dylan Thomas is admired, meanwhile, for his *"unintellectualism"* (again, Shapiro's emphasis). Henry Miller is declared, in the title of the piece on him, "Our Greatest Living Author." (Wisely, Shapiro changed the title of the Miller article to "The Greatest Living Patagonian" when he reprinted it in the 1975 book *The Poetry Wreck: Selected Essays 1950-1970.* Unwisely, he did not remove the large chunks of Miller's execrable prose from the reprinted essay.) And Lawrence, we are told, "committed the horrible sin of expressing his own feelings in poetry."

As promised in the preface, the modernists are criticized at length. Little of this criticism, however, deals with the innate qualities of the poetry. What Shapiro focuses on instead is the *effect* modern poetry has had on twentieth-century society. Thus we are told how modern poetry, as Shapiro writes in the Yeats essay, has become, through its use of myth and the cultural past, *"a surrogate for religion."* Shapiro's real bête noire here is the historical, political, and cultural pronouncements that many of the modernists made. Yeats, Shapiro tells us, made a "sociological ass" of himself in his historical writings. Eliot and Pound became purveyors of "sociological opinion," not to mention anti-Semites and fascist apologists to boot. (One wonders why there isn't a word about Williams's anti-Semitism in the essay on him in *In Defense of Ignorance.*) The truth is, Shapiro doesn't systematically criticize the poetry of Yeats and Eliot very much at all in *In Defense of Ignorance.* He's so busy discussing their prose and politics, and the professors who've made them into an industry (as well as into a *"surrogate for religion"*), that he never has time to come to terms with the poetry.

The essay on Auden in *In Defense of Ignorance* is surprisingly positive, given how removed Shapiro was by now from Auden's impersonal aesthetic. But there is still one Audenesque idea that Shapiro follows in *In Defense of Ignorance,* and will continue to

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follow. This is the belief, expressed in Shapiro's essay entitled "The Great Artificer," that "[e]very artist by instinct should fight against the principle of multiplicity of meaning."

In every way but this, then, Shapiro's next book, *The Bourgeois Poet* (1964), was a repudiation of his master. Gone are rhyme and meter and the loving attention to the world. The prose "poems" that make up the book have room for everything under the sun. (As Shapiro admitted later, their "form" was governed by the typewriter's margins.) *The Bourgeois Poet,* which owes much to Allen Ginsberg and the Beats, is the realization of Shapiro's desire to include in his poetry every raw detail he sees, hears, or feels. We can be thankful that the following section, appropriately entitled "Anti-Poem," has not been included in *New & Selected Poems, 1940-1986*:

> Orchards hang in the newspaper of sky. It's snowing names and addresses over the world, O lovely splash!
>
> In dry percussion, hammers of prosperity practice against the too-green corn. The wheat field narrows, then disappears, leaving a memory of dry wind-waves. Who eats dry wheat but boys, wheat the hue of the backs of eighteen-century books. Children spring from the doors where there are no trees. Roofer up there, it's been a good day.

In another section, also omitted from the new book, the aspect of "reality" granted unconditional admission into the "poem" is Shapiro's internal musings on one of his new aesthetic beliefs:

> Lower the standard: that's my motto. Somebody is always putting the food out of reach. We're tired of falling off ladders. Who says a child can't paint? A pro is somebody who does it for money. Lower the standards. Let's all play poetry. Down with ideals, flags, convention buttons, morals, the scrambled eggs on the admiral's hat. I'm talking sense. Lower the standards. Sabotage the stylistic approach. Let weeds grow in the subdivision. Putty up the incisions in the library facade, those names that frighten grade-school teachers, those names whose U's are cut like V's. Burn the *Synopticon* and *The Harvard Classics.* Lower the standard on classics, battleships, Russian ballet, national anthems (but they're low enough). Break through to the bottom . . . .

If Shapiro is attempting to be ironic here, his irony is lost on me, since in every conceivable way *The Bourgeois Poet* tries, and succeeds, in "lower[ing] the standard" in poetry. No doubt the book would have perplexed Auden. But Shapiro's relinquishment of his intellect to the thrust of reality (be it the reality of the world or the reality of his passing thoughts) is arguably the logical fulfillment of Auden's aesthetic of a poetry open to the world.

To Abolish Children (1968), the book of essays that followed *The Bourgeois Poet,* was primarily Shapiro's attempt to distance himself from the new counterculture. Nothing, of course, could have been more ironic, since Shapiro was responsible for providing the Movement with two of its major literary ornaments. Yet in the title essay of this book Shapiro condemns the "intellectual infantilism" of the radicals, the "patent absurdity" of the open university, and the "largely hypocritical" dissent on the Vietnam War. "The 'Underground,'" Shapiro asserts, "did not raise its voice against the Russian suppression of Hungary." These sensible observations precede by about fifty pages the utterly nonsensical essay—entitled "A Defense of Bad Poetry"—in which Shapiro argues for a poetry that will "subvert the standards" and "will not please."

Shapiro's last few books of poetry are as debilitated as *To Abolish Children* is confused. In *White-Haired Lover* (1968), Shapiro returns to rhyme and meter for a series of rather cloying sonnets addressed to his lover. (None is in *New & Selected Poems, 1940-1986.*) In "I Swore to Stab the Sonnet," the poet writes about how his lover helped

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him gain his formal—and psychological—equilibrium after he had temporarily lost his bearings. If only the poetic result was better:

> I swore to stab the sonnet with my pen,
> Squash the black widow in a grandstand play
> By gunning down the sonnet form—and then
> I heard you quote my schoolboy love Millay.
> I went to find out what she used to say
> About her tribulations and her men
> And loved her poetry though I now am gray
> And found out love of love poems once again.
> Now I'm the one that's stabbed—son of a bitch!
> With my own poisoned ballpoint pen of love
> And write in *sonnet* form to make my *pitch,*
> Words I no longer know the meaning of
> If I could write one honest sentence now
> I'd say I love you but I don't know how.

Adult Bookstore (1976), Shapiro's most recent collection of all new poems, is even more of a repudiation of *The Bourgeois Poet. Adult Bookstore* is the least "personal" of all of Shapiro's post-Fifties books. It is therefore very reminiscent of *Person, Place and Thing* and *V-Letter.* The titles alone indicate that Shapiro is once again intent on ferreting out the representative features of the postwar American landscape: "Garage Sale," "Girls Working in Banks," "The Humanities Building," and, of course, the title poem. In "The Humanities Building," Shapiro "tells the truth" about one of the more lamentable aspects of our country. The result is a poem that Auden himself probably would have liked:

> All the bad Bauhaus comes to a head
> In this gray slab, this domino, this plinth
> Standing among the olives or the old oak trees,
> As the case may be, and whatever the clime.
> No bells, no murals, no gargoyles,
> But rearing like a fort with slits of eyes
> Suspicious in the aggregate, its tons
> Of concrete, glaciers of no known color,
> Gaze down upon us. Saint Thomas More,
> Behold the Humanities Building! . . .

But nothing offers solider proof that Shapiro has come full circle poetically than one of the four new poems in *New & Selected Poems, 1940-1986.* "At Auden's Grave" relates the poet's journey to the place where his master, as Shapiro writes, "lies sleeping in a vale . . . ." Near the end of the poem, the poet, addressing Auden, says that he has come "to bless this plot where you are lain, / Poet who made poetry whole again."

As moving as Shapiro's return to his master is, however, "At Auden's Grave" has none of the sheer dazzle of "Buick," "Drug Store," or "Haircut." Shapiro himself seems to be aware of the diminishment of his poetic powers. In "Grant's Tomb Revisited," one of the handful of new poems in *Love & War,* a new-and-selected that came out in 1984, he writes: "We've all seen better days, / Hiram Ulysses."

It would be easy to attribute the mediocre level of Shapiro's recent work to the declining powers of an aging poet. But I doubt that age has much to do with this. What has stymied Shapiro in the last decade of his life is precisely what has stymied him, to one degree or another, throughout his career: the legacy of W. H. Auden. Early on, Shapiro was well-versed in the dangers of the modernist aesthetic, namely, its tendency to make the poet think he can change the world. But Shapiro all but closed his eyes to the equally real dangers of Auden's poetic beliefs. For there is a price to be paid for the exclusive concentration on the world of reality, and for the suppression of the transforming poetic ego. It is a price that is paid in the quality of one's work. Shapiro's poetry is simply too dependent on the more transient aspects of the world. Placing himself at the mercy of reality may have helped Shapiro avoid trying to "speak for the race." But in refusing to make the world *mean* for *him,* he permitted himself to be subsumed constantly by his material. As a result, we have no strong sense of Shapiro's poetic identity running through his oeuvre.

Is Shapiro aware of this? Perhaps. The massive cuts he has made in compiling *New & Selected Poems, 1940-1986* would seem to

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indicate that all he wishes to preserve is the briefest sketch of his long career. But if this is the reason for the slightness of the new book, Shapiro may have gone too far. Although one can agree with his radical reduction of *The Bourgeois Poet* and the total rejection of *White-Haired Lover,* it is hard to agree with all of Shapiro's exclusions. The truth is, there is still a *Collected Poems* of Karl Shapiro to be done. Such a book would include "F. O. Matthiessen: An Anniversary," part of *Essay on Rime,* and more generous selections from *V-Letter* and *Trial of a Poet.*

In leaving the task of putting together an authentic *Collected Poems* to posterity, Shapiro again mimics his master Auden, whose own *Collected Poems* was scarred by numerous changes and omissions. But then it was to be expected that Karl Shapiro would near the end of his career be as riddled by doubt as Auden was at the end of his.

RLS meets TLS

Robert Louis Stevenson The Lantern-Bearers and Other Essays. Selected with an introduction by Jeremy Treglown. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 290 pages, $30

reviewed by Bruce Bawer

Coming across the name of Robert Louis Stevenson in a new publisher's catalogue is rather like picking up the telephone to find oneself being chatted up by an old friend whom one has not thought about in years and was never all that close to in the first place. Though far from unhappy to hear the fellow's voice, one could hardly be faulted for reacting with, above all, a feeling of profound wonderment—and even, perhaps, a trace of suspicion: what in heaven, after so many years of silence, could have motivated him to call?

Naturally, Stevenson himself, who last time we looked was still resting peacefully under the wide and starry Samoan sky, has nothing to do with placing this particular call. Indeed, one has the feeling that Stevenson—a skeptic in regard to the motives of publishers ("More and more," he gripes in one essay, "the publisher comes to shroud his operations in shadow")—would have been as curious as anyone, to put it temperately, about the story behind the appearance of *The Lantern-Bearers and Other Essays.* Nor, I think, if he were aware of such matters, would he have hesitated to suggest that this assemblage—which first came out last year in Britain—might well owe its publication less to the keen interest of the Farrar, Straus editorial board in his work than in their regard for the position of Jeremy Treglown, the book's editor, who is (as it happens) the editor as well of England's most powerful critical journal, the *Times Literary Supplement.* Certainly it seems unlikely that a figure less loftily situated in the literary firmament would have been able to persuade Farrar, Straus and Giroux to publish such a book.

Now, this is not to suggest that Stevenson's oeuvre is beneath notice. On the contrary, almost a century after his death, much of his work remains highly diverting, and his career as a whole continues to represent a remarkable object lesson in the potency of artistic commitment in the face of adversity. Born in Edinburgh in 1850, he was plagued throughout his brief life by tuberculosis; yet he seems never to have succumbed to melancholia or self-pity. Instead he struggled to live as fully as he could, and created in his fiction a romantic world into which both he and his readers—many of them children—could escape from the more dull and degrading facts of existence. Stevenson's imagination was very much that of a boy; his famous poem "The Land of Counterpane" would seem to suggest that the form his creativity took throughout his life was determined in large part by his intense childhood longing for adventure beyond the sickroom:

When I was sick and lay a-bed,
I had two pillows at my head,

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And all my toys beside me lay
To keep me happy through the day.

And sometimes for an hour or so
I watched my leaden soldiers go,
With different uniforms and drills,
Among the bed-clothes, through the hills;

And sometimes sent my ships in fleets
All up and down among the sheets;
Or brought my trees and houses out,
And planted cities all about.

I was the giant great and still
That sits upon the pillow-hill,
And sees before him, dale and plain,
The pleasant land of counterpane.

After spending his undergraduate years (to quote Treglown) as a "truant, drinker and lover," Stevenson—a self-described idler who refused to take on the exhaustive study that would have been required of him had he become, like his father, an engineer—took a degree in law and was admitted to the bar in 1875. He never set up practice, though: from an early age his only truly serious professional ambition had been to write. And so he wrote. Yet he was no idle scribbler; brief and turbulent as it was, his writing career, once it got under way, proved to be incredibly productive. His youthful travels on the Continent, which were prompted both by his gadding spirit and by his desire to find a healthful climate, furnished the material for his first two books, *An Inland Voyage* (1878) and *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes* (1879). Meanwhile he published numerous essays in the *Cornhill* magazine, many of which were collected in the volumes *Virginibus Puerisque* (1881) and *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* (1882); part of his reason for writing these essays was to support himself and his beloved, Fanny Osbourne, an American divorcée ten years his senior whom he married in San Francisco (against his parents' wishes) in 1880. Stevenson also wrote short stories, which were assembled in *New Arabian Nights* (1882), and poems, collected in several volumes, notably *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885); and he collaborated on four plays with William Ernest Henley (a fellow consumptive) and on three light novels—*The Wrong Box, The Wreckers, Ebb Tide*—with his stepson, Lloyd Osbourne.

But of course his most celebrated writings are his novels of adventure and fantasy, the first (and most enduring) of which, *Treasure Island* (1883), he wrote as an entertainment for his stepson. The novel's spectacular success doubtless had much to do with timing: it came along at a point in history when the English novel tended toward the social and naturalistic; the post-Dickens, post-Trollope, post-Thackeray literary public was ready for a fresh infusion of literary romanticism in the tradition of Daniel Defoe and Sir Walter Scott. *Treasure Island* was succeeded by other romances: *Prince Otto* (1885), *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Kidnapped* (both 1886), *The Black Arrow* (1888), and the short-story collection *The Merry Men* (1887). In 1888—still longing for exotic adventure and for a more congenial climate—Stevenson travelled with his family to the South Seas and settled on the island of Samoa, where he gained a position of influence among the natives, who knew him as Tusitala ("teller of tales"); there he wrote several more books, including *The Master of Ballantrae* (1889), *A Footnote to History* and *Catriona* (both 1893), and *Weir of Hermiston,* which was left uncompleted when he died, at age forty-four, in 1894. "My fame will not last more than four years," Stevenson predicted morosely just before his death; but though his readership has declined considerably in this century, and though modern critics have complained (justly) about the superficiality of his plots and characters, he has continued to be enjoyed by many young readers, and to be admired widely for the consistently graceful style and *joie de vivre* that characterize all of his work.

And that includes his work in the essay, a genre to which his contribution is far from negligible. A student of Montaigne, Browne,

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Hazlitt, and Lamb, Stevenson took on a great variety of topics with an elegance, wit, and panache that place him, if not among these masters, then (at his finest) a mere rung or two below. Despite certain misgivings about Treglown's selection and arrangement of the thirty essays in *The Lantern-Bearers,* one cannot deny that they fairly represent Stevenson's characteristic manner and broad range.

To begin at the lighter end of the spectrum, the book contains two brief essays of the sort that one might describe as whimsical in a classically British way, essays in which the joke lies largely in the fact that the author is devoting countless long, solemn, periodic sentences to the exploration of an absurdly slight topic. One such essay is "The Philosophy of Umbrellas," in which Stevenson expatiates upon the significance of the umbrella as the British symbol of respectability; another is "The Character of Dogs," wherein he discourses upon the intellect, gallantry, affectations, and (yes) respectability of the dog in general and of various "canine gentlemen" of his acquaintance in particular. Though not without a certain eccentric appeal, these pieces are likely to strike most modern readers as labored and precious, to say the least. Not entirely dissimilar to these essays, if (in varying degrees) less precious and more substantial, are Stevenson's homilies on love ("On Falling in Love"), truth ("Truth of Intercourse"), illness ("The Misgivings of Convalescence"), age ("Crabbed Age and Youth"), and idleness ("An Apology for Idleness").

The last-mentioned piece is characteristic. In it, Stevenson mounts an impressive and engaging argument that "[e]xtreme *busyness,* whether at school or college, kirk or market, is a symptom of deficient vitality; and a faculty for idleness implies a catholic appetite and a strong sense of personal identity." He goes on:

> There is a sort of dead-alive, hackneyed people about, who are scarcely conscious of living except in the exercise of some conventional occupation. Bring these fellows into the country, or set them aboard ship, and you will see how they pine for their desk or their study. They have no curiosity; they cannot give themselves over to random provocations; they do not take pleasure in the exercise of their faculties for its own sake; and unless Necessity lays about them with a stick, they will even stand still. It is no good speaking to such folk: they *cannot* be idle, their nature is not generous enough; and they pass those hours in a sort of coma, which are not dedicated to furious moiling in the gold-mill. When they do not require to go to the office, when they are not hungry and have no mind to drink, the whole breathing world is a blank to them. If they have to wait an hour or so for a train, they fall into a stupid trance with their eyes open.

Though Stevenson's style here is almost dangerously expansive (he continues to develop the point for another five sentences), the passage has a certain charm and an indubitable wisdom. Equally winsome are his celebrated nature pieces, "Forest Notes: Idle Hours" and "Walking Tours," and his essays on travel: "Edinburgh," "In the Latin Quarter," "The Old Pacific Capital" (a fascinating description of Monterey, California, where Stevenson lived for a time), and "Davos in Winter." These pieces illustrate his distinctive gift for evocative atmospheric detail. Stevenson's talents seem less effectively put to use, however, in the book's three political commentaries. For a man who befriended South Sea savages and loved American democracy, Stevenson comes off, in two of these essays, as something of a Tory. In "The Day After Tomorrow" he complains that, as a result of late Victorian social reforms (e.g., child labor laws), "we are all becoming Socialists without knowing it"; in "Confessions of a Unionist" he takes Americans to task for supporting the Irish struggle for independence, in the course of his argument managing to paint the Irish as little better than animals. A sharp ironic contrast to these pro-English sentiments is provided in the third of these pieces, "The Foreigner at Home," wherein Stevenson speaks with pride of his native Scotland's

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distinct cultural and legal heritage, and chides the obnoxiously "self-contained" Englishman for his ignorance thereof. Alas, what all three of these essays have in common is that, far more than anything else in the book, they seem hopelessly dated; their historical interest notwithstanding, the collection would probably be stronger without them.

Not surprisingly, *The Lantern-Bearers* includes a number of pieces on writers and writing. In "Walt Whitman," a very sensitive study of a contemporary whom he admired and was influenced by (the critic Vivian de Sola Pinto has gone so far as to suggest that "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde can be taken as a symbol of [Whitman]"), Stevenson makes some perceptive observations and draws cogent distinctions. Citing a kind, informative letter that Whitman wrote to the mother of a dead soldier whom he had nursed (oddly, the longest quotations here are drawn not from Whitman's poetry but from his prose), Stevenson comments sensibly that "[l]iterary reticence is not Whitman's stronghold; and this reticence is not literary, but humane; it is not that of a good artist but that of a good man." Sympathetic as he is to Whitman's poetry, however, Stevenson does not give him a free ride. He calls Whitman's verse "rough, unrhymed, lyrical . . . often so rugged and careless that it can only be described by saying that he has not taken the trouble to write prose. I believe myself that it [Whitman's verse form] was selected principally because it was easy to write . . . ." Yet because Whitman "has small regard to literary decencies, and is totally free from literary timidities," and because "[h]e is neither afraid of being slangy nor of being dull . . . [nor] of being ridiculous," his poetry is "a most surprising compound of plain grandeur, sentimental affectation, and downright nonsense" whose excellences one can appreciate only when one "has grown accustomed to his faults." Certainly this must be as discerning a critical appraisal as Whitman received in his own century. What of his fellow Victorians' belief that Whitman's poetry was obscene? Stevenson dismisses it out of hand, with good strong sarcasm:

> It seems hardly possible that any being should get evil from so healthy a book as the *Leaves of Grass,* which is simply comical wherever it falls short of nobility; but if there be any such, who cannot both take and leave, who cannot let a single opportunity pass by without some unworthy and unmanly thought, I should have as great difficulty, and neither more nor less, in recommending the works of Whitman as in lending them Shakespeare, or letting them go abroad outside of the grounds of a private asylum.

This impatience with Philistines is equally evident in his essay on Samuel Pepys. Reviewing an expurgated edition of the diaries, Stevenson remarks that "when we purchase six huge and distressingly expensive volumes, we are entitled to be treated rather more like scholars and rather less like children." As in the case of Whitman, he quotes from the text of a Pepys letter and proceeds to draw a distinction between the attributes of the man, as revealed therein, and those of the artist. Yet Stevenson recognizes that whereas the Whitman of the poems and the Whitman of the letters were one and the same man, the thoroughly conventional Pepys of the letters was utterly different from the Pepys revealed to us—flaws, crudities, and all—in the diaries. "The respectability of Pepys was deeply grained," observes Stevenson. "He has no idea of truth except for the Diary." Here, as in the Whitman essay, Stevenson demonstrates a natural empathy for the cultural subversive, for the rebel against Victorian respectability. (Contrasting sharply with these two relatively lively essays are a couple of long, stiff, and solemn dissertations upon the careers of great Scotsmen: John Knox, the founder of the Church of Scotland, and Robert Burns. In ambition and tone, these two pieces are at the opposite end of the spectrum from Stevenson's slight pieces on umbrellas and dogs; as in the case of those pieces, however, their inclusion in the book seems a distinct editorial error.)

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Stevenson's attitudes toward writing are explicitly elaborated upon in half a dozen pieces. In "A Gossip on Romance" and "A Humble Remonstrance" he speaks up, unsurprisingly, in defense of the novel of romance: "the artist writes with more gusto and effect of those things which he has only wished to do, than of those which he has done. Desire is a wonderful telescope, and Pisgah the best observatory." In "My First Book—*Treasure Island*" he describes the composition of that novel."Men are born," he writes, "with various manias: from my earliest childhood it was mine to make a plaything of imaginary series of events"; the plaything called *Treasure Island,* he explains, grew not only out of his imagination but out of memories of "Poe, Defoe, and Washington Irving, a copy of Johnson's *Buccaneers,* the name of the Dead Man's Chest from Kingsley's *At Last,* some recollections of canoeing on the high seas, a cruise in a fifteen-ton schooner yacht, and the map itself [of Treasure Island, which Stevenson had carefully drawn] with its infinite, eloquent suggestion." Likewise, in his compelling (if decidedly pre-Freudian) "Chapter on Dreams," Stevenson explains how the ideas for *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and many other stories were given to him in dreams by "some Brownie, some Familiar, some unseen collaborator." And "Authors and Publishers" is a diatribe against publishers (at least one of whom, Newman Flower, has humorously recorded the irrational suspicion with which Stevenson treated him).

Nowhere does Stevenson set forth his ideas about writing more plainly than in his "Letter to a Young Gentleman who Proposes to Embrace the Career of Art." For all the romanticism of his own work, Stevenson's chief purpose here is to lay to rest the "young gentleman's" presumably romantic conception of his chosen art. To begin with, Stevenson argues that true artistry is a matter of predestination, that among young people "the temptation [to create] is perhaps nearly as common as the vocation is rare," and that it is difficult for an aspiring writer to know whether he has a genuine artistic vocation. How can he tell if he does? The main thing, Stevenson answers, is that he must recognize in himself a childlike zest and dedication:

> The book, the statue, the sonata, must be gone upon with the unreasoning good faith and the unflagging spirit of children at their play. *Is it worth doing?*—when it shall have occurred to any artist to ask himself that question, it is implicitly answered in the negative. It does not occur to the child as he plays at being a pirate on the dining-room sofa, nor to the hunter as he pursues his quarry; and the candour of the one and the ardour of the other should be united in the bosom of the artist.
>
> If you recognize in yourself some such decisive taste, there is no room for hesitation: follow your bent . . . .

But don't get any fancy ideas about your obligation to the Muse, Stevenson warns; "the end of all art [is] to please." Whatever one's grievances against the middle-class public, a man's first duty, artist or no, is "to pay his way"; until he has done so, "he must pay assiduous court to the bourgeois who carries the purse." (Similarly, in "My First Book," Stevenson refers to "my paymaster, the great public.") "If in the course of these capitulations he shall falsify his talent, it can never have been a strong one, and he will have preserved a better thing than talent—character." What if the artist be too independent of mind to "stoop to this necessity"? One course is open to him: "he can desist from art, and follow some more manly way of life." Yes, "more manly way of life"! And this isn't the extent of Stevenson's irreverence toward art; before he's through, he has compared artists to prostitutes—or, as he calls them, "the Daughters of Joy"—and has argued that "[t]here should be no honours for the artist . . . the honours are pre-empted for other trades, less agreeable and perhaps more useful." What a manifesto! Though he is doubtless out to banish all romantic, adolescent notions of art from his reader's mind, Stevenson ends up sounding not like the bracing voice of mature rea-

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son but rather like the ultimate Victorian-era Philistine; there would hardly seem to be a single category of nineteenth-century anti-art prejudice that his "Letter" does not manage to reinforce.

Finally, Treglown includes in *The Lantern-Bearers* a handful of miscellaneous personal pieces that could mostly have been done without: an unremarkable profile of Stevenson's father; a record of an underwater-diving episode which is not nearly as engrossing as it should be; and a letter—spirited enough, though it hardly seems to qualify as an essay—in defense of a priest, Father Damien, who ran the Hawaiian leper colony. There is also the title piece, an affecting memoir of the author's boyhood which William James once commended "for the truth of its matter and the excellence of its form." And then, I'm afraid to say, there's Treglown's introduction, which is longer than all but four of the essays in the book and duller than every last one of them. For the editor of a major literary journal, Treglown writes astonishingly clumsy prose; he speaks of Stevenson's "formal educational chances" and comments that Stevenson's pieces on Burns and Knox "deserve to put Stevenson . . . in the front ranks of Victorian biographical essayists."

Such prose has one virtue, anyway: it makes one appreciate Stevenson all the more. There is, indeed, something unusually appealing about this writer who spoke of himself as having a child's imagination and an adult's sense of responsibility; who did not hesitate to attack those he considered Philistines on the one hand and those he looked upon as artistic poseurs on the other; who believed in narrative drive and the power of dreams. Yet despite the seriousness, style, and charm of Stevenson's best essays, the writings that Jeremy Treglown has collected here do not quite add up to a book—not, in any event, to a thirty-dollar 1988 book. One wonders especially why such patently inferior pieces as the ones on Knox, Burns, Thomas Stevenson, and dogs were included in the first place, instead of, say, "Pulvis et Umbra" and "Aes Triplex." Given Treglown's implicit desire to piece together something of a Stevenson self-portrait, as a matter of fact, it is particularly odd that "Aes Triplex" should have been omitted, for it comprises a succinct and witty statement of one of Stevenson's most cherished and characteristic notions—namely, that the more abundant one's vital spirit, the more readily and matter-of-factly one will risk death, and that this is as it should be—and thus comes closer to summing up Stevenson's philosophy of life than anything in Treglown's book.

Empire, the novel

Gore Vidal Empire. Random House, 486 pages, $22.50

reviewed by Brock Baker

In August of 1898 a young American woman who has been raised in France by an eccentric expatriate father heir to an encaustic tile firm in Massachusetts is visiting the "summer embassy" of the American Ambassador to the Court of St. James located that year in the Kent countryside. The victory over the Spanish in the Spanish-American War is announced to the household by telegram. The young woman, named Caroline Sanford, also receives a message from America: the will of her late father, which has proved difficult to decipher, is going to be probated much sooner than her half-brother and the other principal heir to her father's fifteen million have indicated. Is her brother trying to cheat her out of her share, she involuntarily wonders aloud? And thus begins the latest installment in Mr. Vidal's series of novels set at various key epochs in United States political history.

Caroline Sanford, an invented character, is surrounded by historical figures. At the summer embassy the notables are John Hay, the current ambassador, former secretary to Lincoln, and shortly to become Secretary of State under first McKinley, then Theodore Roosevelt; Henry Adams, Jr., descendant of

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two presidents and the future author of *The Education of Henry Adams*; and Henry James, the novelist, then living nearby, at Rye. When she travels to New York, and then on to Washington, she meets Hay and Adams again; as well as Mrs. Mary Astor, President McKinley, and William Randolph Hearst. In the course of the next six years, while waiting for her inheritance (to be hers only at twenty-seven instead of twenty-one, on account of a dubious interpretation of the last of her father's wills insisted upon by her ambitious, unscrupulous half-brother), Caroline manages to buy a failing newspaper (she sells four Poussins spirited out of her family chateau to finance the purchase); and by sensationalizing its coverage in abject imitation of the yellow journalism of Hearst makes a modest success out of it. Her first betrothed is killed in a freak accident just before they are to be married (this was John Hay's son Del); she loses her virginity to a handsome, married Congressman, then marries a recently impoverished second cousin when five months pregnant, intending and achieving a *mariage blanc* while maintaining relations with her lover. Meanwhile, McKinley has decided to keep the Philippines after the defeat of the Spanish, and puts down a rebellion to consolidate the United States's hold there. These decisions and the bellicosity of his successor Roosevelt means that the United States has become an "empire," concentrated in the Pacific with an eye to the China trade, for which the Japanese, the Germans, the French, and the British are all vying.

The author has obviously done a great deal of research for this project. Relevant letters and diaries; memoirs by and concerning all the historical personages that appear in the course of the narrative; social histories and political histories; the works of the authors among the well-known folk—all have been carefully perused. Nevertheless, the book has serious defects, both as a novel and as a mode of historical inquiry.

The invented heroine lacks charms or plausibility: her "development" from innocent to hoyden is perceived mechanically, as a plot device solely; her "wit," often referred to, when an example is given, is painfully spurious. (Caroline: "There are . . . many very serious bores at Newport." Blaise, her half-brother: "Do you include half-brothers?" C.: "Only as half-bores, I suppose . . . .")

Then there are those tricks of a certain low type of historical novel that the author employs shamelessly: for some reason the great—James, Adams, McKinley—take this nondescript person very seriously indeed, and confide some of their most profound or politically important thoughts to her, at their first or second meeting. When judged according to the usual criteria for a "mainstream" novel, then, *Empire* is not a success. As a vehicle for bringing the dry bones of history to life on behalf of a popular readership, which idea has often been put forward by admirers of Mr. Vidal's historical series (the others are *Burr, Lincoln, 1876,* and *Washington, D.C.*), *Empire,* like the others, suffers from the author's dubious approach to the genre. First of all, a fictional narrative is inherently ill-equipped to handle historical *controversy* in a responsible manner. No case can be made for a particular position on, say, Theodore Roosevelt's relationship to Tammany Hall, by a variety of author whose prerogatives include artistic license and authorial omniscience. The marshaling of facts, culled from indisputably valid documents, into a rationally persuasive argument—the labors required of the author of a nonfiction work of history if he would win over a reader to his point of view on a topic or interpretation about which there is still controversy—*can't* be reproduced by a novelist.

Only when there is not controversy; when, at the time of writing anyway, a wide and deep consensus exists—such as does exist today, for instance, that Lincoln was a great president, or the Constitution is a key document in the history of republics—can a writer of fiction base scenes and characterizations on such matters without having his story's authority picked apart by scholars of the period. But Mr. Vidal in *Empire* pays no attention to such niceties. That *he* has made

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up his mind about a given topic or historical figure means that, as far as the characterizations, plot, and underlying "message" of *Empire* are concerned, what are in fact merely one man's opinions are presented *as* fact. Therefore, as political history, that is, as a historical accounting made up of opinion *and* fact, each of which has been carefully distinguished from the other, *Empire* is unreliable.

Secondly, if controversial historical questions cannot be recreated usefully in historical fiction, certain atmospheric aspects, of life as it was lived then, can be. (Examples are many of Sir Walter Scott's novels, or Robert Louis Stevenson's, among others.) Here, the reader's reasonable expectations are confounded by the author attempting another sleight of hand. By introducing the sordid detail—Henry James never opened his windows in his house and visitors suffered from the closeness and the flies—or employing the cynical tone—Theodore Roosevelt was a calculating hypocrite only pretending to be a reformer—Mr. Vidal presents the historical personages of his narrative as much less deserving of awe than the proverbial high school textbooks would have them. He brings them down to earth, so to speak, and by this anti-heroic approach, gives those readers who, Cassius-like, have been intimidated by or who are in general envious of any fellow human being's enduring fame, the flattering sense that, in fact, they were no better; indeed, perhaps worse, than "ourselves." (Another plus is that Adams and James *et al.* now become much more plausible companions to the formulaic Caroline.) By providing his readers with this experience of dislocation of what he is postulating they previously believed, the author hopes to leave them with the impression that they now know what these figures from the past were *really* like, and by extension, what the past was really like.

To explore the origins of the American empire through a fictional narrative involving some of its chief architects is an intriguing program for a book and *Empire,* in its first few pages, does compel interest. But the reality and importance of even individuals like John Hay or William Randolph Hearst quickly become irrelevant once the reader grasps the author is not conscientiously attempting to portray who they were and what they did with a novelist's options while also keeping a careful eye to historical fact. Instead, Mr. Vidal has chosen to tidy up the past, leaving out any complexities, in order to make it reflect his own narrowly focused and inveterately cynical temperament. By so proceeding, Mr. Vidal has distorted the past as reprehensibly as the collective author of high school textbooks is supposed to have done.

Is there anything left to savor in *Empire* after this house of cards is revealed for what it is? Perhaps some of the minor details of social history or an anecdote or two: that cars were just beginning to replace horses on the odiferous streets of New York or that the telephone was very new and Hay hated it. On the other hand, McKinley loved it. "He says that it is addictive," reports Hay's assistant. But can a reader even be sure *that* is true?

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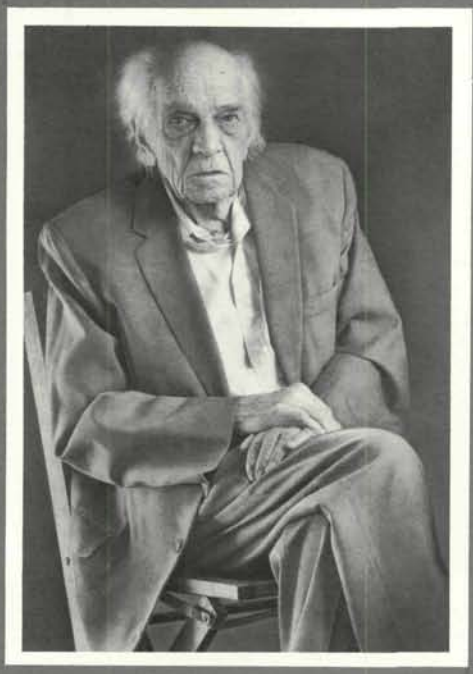

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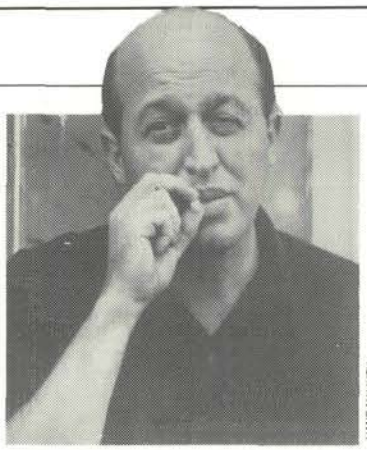
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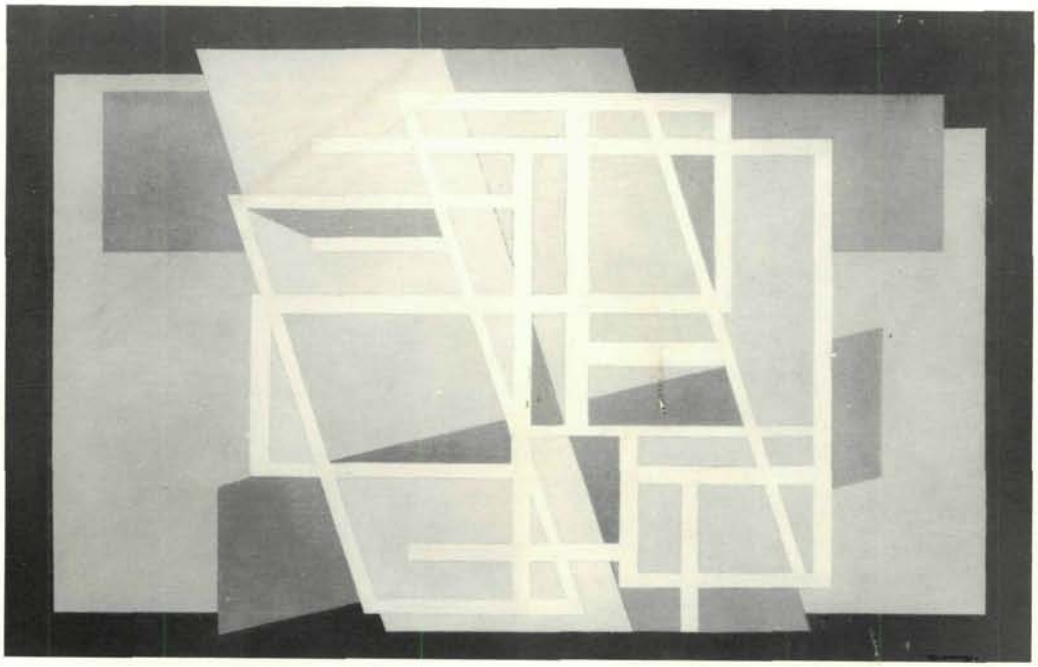

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